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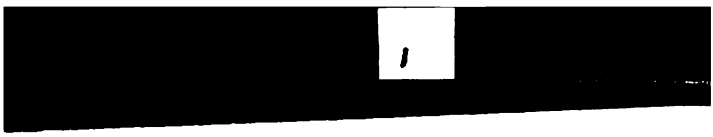








A RED, RED ROSE





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A RED, RED ROSE

BY

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A RED, RED ROSE

CHAPTER I

THE EXILES

THE death of old Andrew Brent, of Brent, Massachusetts, had left his son and daughter, Tom and Amelia, without, so far as they knew, one of their blood in the world.

Their position would have seemed to most people an enviable one. Young, well-educated, and good-looking, with the great monster "Brent's" flinging out money for them even while they slept, they had the ball at their feet from a worldly point of view.

Yet behind Tom Brent's kindly, smiling face, his slow voice and lazy manner, there was still a quite fresh and smarting wound, although Andrew Brent had been in his grave six months and the grass was already velvety upon it. Presently the oblivion, like the grass, would cover the sore place in Tom Brent's heart, but as yet he did not forecast that time—would hardly have wished for it, indeed—although the dis-



comfort of loss was always with him in his most distracted moments, waiting to manifest itself acutely when he should have time to attend to it.

At first sight one would have said that there must have been wide divergencies between father and son. Old Andrew had remained a mill-hand to the day of his death; while his son had had the best education America could produce and need not have been limited to America, if but he had wished it. That his choice had been Harvard instead of Eton and Oxford was a subject of frequent lamentations with his sister Amelia.

"My poor Tom," she would say, putting her white be-ringed fingers on his black coat sleeve, "my poor Tom, you were cheated out of Oxford."

"By my own will, Em," Tom would remind her cheerfully, as though the same thing had not been said scores of times before. "By my own will. You know the dear old man gave me my choice in the matter."

"And you chose Harvard — you dear, Quixotic boy."

"Since Oxford was half a world away, and he was an old man with a heart which might wear through its last shred at any moment."

"Never mind," Amelia would say complacently. "They couldn't have turned you out much better, really."



The brother and sister were entirely different in looks, as in most other ways. Amelia was very American, after her fashion, a brilliant bird of Paradise, the strangest product of the Brent nest, which ought to have produced chickens more homely. To be sure, she had other blood in her than the English operative's.

She dressed with the exquisite daintiness of the rich American, who has an instinct for dress only second to that of the Parisian woman. With a well-dressed Englishwoman you forget the dress, and think only of the goddess whom it so well becomes. In Amelia's case the dress was more insistent. You noticed the velvets and laces and furs and feathers in their detail, as you noticed, and were curious over, the exquisite baubles and trinkets with which she liked to adorn herself.

Amelia was small and pale, with a piquant chin and nose, hazel eyes, and a face that peaked itself at you out of furs or laces according to the time of year. Her face was smaller, more piquant by reason of the fell of dull yellow hair that surrounded it, which arranged itself prettily after the manner of a Florentine angel's waving locks.

It used to amuse Tom, who had a quiet, seldom-expressed sense of humour, to hear Amelia declare that the Brents were English, since she herself would never be taken for anything but an American.

Tom, on the contrary, might pass any day for an Englishman. His accent was non-committal, and the most noticeable thing about it was that there was a hint in it of old Andrew's Northumbrian burr. It was characteristic of Tom that his speech, like everything else about him, should take its trend from the creature he had loved best on earth.

Somewhere at the back of Brent's, with its acres of mill-yards and great white buildings and towering chimneys, there was a little house which the present head of Brent's held in the most tender regard.

It was a small white cottage of two storeys, slated; such a cottage as may be found in thousands on the outskirts of any English town. It had an austere cleanliness of aspect, and though it had not been occupied except at rare intervals for many years, it and its contents were in as good order as though it were occupied every day. It had been the home of Andrew Brent's boyhood and manhood, and kept the sacredness to his heir, as it had to him, of the home where a good woman lights the hearth-fire, and keeps it tended whatever storms may blow outside.

Nearly sixty years ago, old Alexander Brent, the founder of Brent's, had built the cottage for his widowed sister-in-law and her boy, Andrew, who had come out to him from the North of England.

At that time Brent's had been a little place enough—chiefly employed in nail- and screw-making. No one supposed that Alexander had made more than a snug competence, and it was not at all certain to whom it would go, since there was another heir in prospect, the nephew of the late Mrs. Alexander—a pale boy who already occupied a seat in his uncle's counting-house.

Mrs. David Brent and her son were not encouraged to give themselves airs. There was no social communication between the cottage and the house outside the mill-yard where Alexander lived alone, submitting to the caprices of his old housekeeper and entertaining his cronies quietly from time to time.

Fortunately Mrs. David was a humble creature, only too thankful to be delivered from the gaunt wolf that had lain familiarly at her threshold ever since David had been taken from her.

In the cottage she lived pretty much as she had lived at home in England, acting as her own servant, and remembering her distinction as the master's sister-in-law only in so far as she kept herself to herself, and made no friends among the women about her.

There for many a year Andrew had risen in the mirk of the winter mornings and in summer sunrise, in cold or heat, well or ill, to take his place in the factory. There was nothing to

mark him out from the other lads as the master's nephew. It was a life of hard work and content. He was too tired in his little leisure time for dreams and discontent, and there was only one threshold he ever crossed beside his own, that of Mrs. Fitzgerald, the mother of Andrew's rival in the succession to Brent's.

It was natural, seeing what Mrs. Fitzgerald's nature was, that she should welcome to her hearth the boy whose claim might push out the remoter one of her own son. She was a refined creature, of a more gentle ancestry than the folk around her could boast; and Andrew, coming in there, shyly conscious of his threadbare jacket, his heavy boots, and the awkward hands that did not seem to belong to him, worshipped Mrs. Fitzgerald in a way that might have made his own staunch, silent little English mother very jealous if she could have guessed at it behind her son's dumb exterior.

Coarse-minded people said when Andrew Brent married Katie Fitzgerald that Mrs Fitzgerald had taken care to be on the safe side when she had encouraged young Andrew's visits.

Yet then and for many years afterwards the prospect seemed poor enough. Alexander had declined to interest himself in the young



people's marriage, had, indeed, made some saturnine remarks which promised ill for any expectations they might have from him.

Presently Henry Fitzgerald entered a theological college, in the teeth of Alexander's opposition, and gave up all chance of his inheritance.

The next thing that happened was that the old man quarrelled with his housekeeper after bearing unexampled things from her for many years, and straightway commanded his sister-in-law to take up his housekeeping, with a stout servant lass under her to relieve her of hard work. Mrs. David was frequently heard to remark afterwards that she had never worked so hard in her life as in undoing this damsel's misdoings.

The young couple lived on in the cottage very happily. Katie, under her mother's tuition, extended the gardening which Mrs. David had begun when she carried over the ocean to this alien soil slips of gilly-flowers and pinks, seeds of poppies and sweet peas, which, being carefully tended, made the place in time a replica of an English cottage garden.

It was no wonder that old Andrew loved the place for its memories. Long afterwards, when Brent's, which had yielded old Alexander more money than anyone dreamt of his possessing, had extended in his successor's practical hands to a huge business, Andrew would often steal

from his fine house to the Mill Cottage for hours of quiet communion with his dead.

Now that he was gone, Tom, his son, had shamefaced hankerings after the cottage for his own residence. He had oddly quiet tastes, and derived no pleasure from the life of the clubman and the society man which was offered to him.

The cottage with its countrified aspect, its gay little garden, its mill-stream, which had long ceased to be a factor in the life of Brent's, and widened now into a shallow pool at the foot of the garden, appealed to him delicately and insistently. Doubtless he had inherited these quiet country loves from his grandmother Fitzgerald — whose delight in such things had brought upon her the derisive amazement of her neighbours, if only she had been conscious of it.

Nothing would have given Tom greater pleasure than to have shifted his belongings, his few excellent books, and as few and excellent pictures, into the cottage, and there to have made himself a masculine bower, secure against all intrusion other than that of the trusty old servant who had kept the cottage of memories safe from moth and rust these many years back.

Only for Em—Em was Tom's familiar, affectionate name for his sister. Em depended on him for companionship. She had a devoted affection for her brother, which perhaps was one



of the reasons for her coldness towards young America—that portion of it which since she had worn her commencement dress, and even before it, had sighed at her feet.

No, he could not desert Em. He could not leave her to inhabit all alone the lofty rooms, to sit to the elaborate meals with their elaborate incidents which his simple soul would have despised if he had thought about them. He did not think, simply because he had been so long accustomed to them. He was ashamed to breathe his desire for the cottage to Em, that bird of Paradise, whom, daughter of a mill-hand though she was, it seemed impossible to imagine without circumstances of luxury.

Six months now had elapsed since their father's death. Many a time while they sat together, Tom silently smoking, his sister flashing about the room noiselessly, like a restless painted lady or tiger moth, he had fancied that Amelia's restlessness covered some anxiety or project that moved her deeply.

The six months had elapsed to the day, when in the twilight, as yet unsuffused by the pale glow of the electric lamps, she fluttered to his side and leant over him with two delicate hands upon his shoulders. He heard her sigh below her breath, as though she were going to ease herself.

"What is it, Em?" he asked, seizing the two hands, and drawing them down about his neck.

"I would not speak of it sooner," she said, with a soft hurry of utterance. "I gave you time to pay—all proper respect. Now—we have no ties here, Tom."

"Why, no, dear," he assented. "No ties, in the binding sense of the word, although we have some likings. We seem to suffice for one another."

"Binding—that was just what I meant," she said, unheeding the rest of his speech. "There is nothing really that need keep us. Is there, Tom?"

He drew her face down over his shoulder until by turning himself about he could see her pale in the shadows of her hair and the twilit room.

"I foresee what you are going to ask me, Em," he answered kindly.

"And there is nothing against it?"

He heard the rush and commotion of her breath, and she was the dearest thing to him on earth.

"I have set up no barriers," he said gravely.

"No, indeed you have not. It was as though you felt with me that our real life must begin over there. People wonder at you, Tom, heart-whole at thirty. And as for me—the proposals I have had, they are uncountable. I would not listen to them—even Lord Saxby, though he was an Englishman, and had half a



dozen lovely places. I wanted that we should do it ourselves—you and I; it was something no one else could help us in. If I had had another kind of brother I would have married an Englishman, but it would not have been the same. It would have been like getting in at the back door——"

"Quiet, quiet, Em," interrupted Tom. "I haven't yet got at the details of this plan of yours. What is it you want me to agree to?"

Her face fell.

"I thought you had been agreeing," she said, half withdrawing her hands.

"I have no doubt that I shall agree," he answered, putting them back into their former place. "I have no one else to think about now but you, Em."

"We shall select the most aristocratic of all the counties," she cried, with a lilt in her voice and her hands pressing his shoulders for gratitude.

"We shall be intruders, Em," he said, laughing, but his heart had caught something of the lightness of hers.

She brushed away the speech as though she had not heard it.

"There are not many things here I shall want to keep," she went on, looking about her.

"You do not intend to return then?"



"Not I. We are going home, Tom."

His pulses leapt to the yearning affection in her tone.

"We return very differently," he said. "Still, we must not altogether forget Brent's. I can leave things safely to Granger, and I can run out now and again to see how everything is going."

"The incomparable Granger!" she laughed lightly. "Brent's could never run without Granger, could it, Tom?"

"I should have to realise," he replied, "or this plan of yours must fail,—without Granger."

"I think I have the dearest brother on earth," she purred.

"You are more Fitzgerald than Brent after all, Em," he said; "that is where you get your coaxing tongue, and your irregular features, and your vivacity, and your——" he had been going to say "style," but he paused.

"Ah, yes," she said, understanding him; "only for the Fitzgeralds I should perhaps be dropping a curtsy to my betters instead of aspiring to be as good as the best of them."

"Only for the Fitzgeralds," he replied, "you might have been content to remain a good American citizen."



CHAPTER II

ORIELS

THEY were at the Savoy, breakfasting in a bow window that overlooked the river. The table was strewn with correspondence that showed that they had not been letting the grass grow under their feet. House agents' lists, photographs of all kinds of houses, newspaper cuttings, littered the cloth. Amelia, eating with the appetite of a healthy butterfly, dipped into the correspondence between her sips of coffee and her pecks at the fruit. She fingered affectionately a large sheet of parchment-white paper, which, with its monogram at top, represented business in its most dignified and hereditary aspect.

"I have my heart set on 'Oriels,'" she cried. She had returned to the letter for the twentieth time after pausing at others with an uninterested air. "I have my heart set on 'Oriels.' Supposing we run down there to-day?"

"How far?"



"A mere nothing. Five hours in the train. Look at the windows, Tom! Can you resist them? And that cunning moat! I wonder if there are fish in it."

"Nothing but mud, I should say," replied practical Tom. "And what's more, I'm not going to encourage fish. It's bound to be unsanitary; and if the house *is* Elizabethan, I don't care to have my house walls set in a swamp. I shall drain the moat, Em."

"Iconoclast!" cried Amelia, with her eyes raised in horror. "And if there are water-lilies in it? I can almost fancy I see them in the photograph."

"I shall have to dispossess them. That is all. The moat is all I have against the place, Em."

Amelia looked at her brother. She knew that when Tom took the trouble to oppose her in anythng he really meant it. She looked and rose to the occasion.

"It may be dry, after all," she said. "And we must make a sunk garden of it."

"Make it as pretty as you like, Em, so long as you don't want the water. You'll have plenty of that. See; there is a lake before the door. You can see fleets of water lilies in that, and no mistake."

"Ah! dear creatures! We must have boats, Tom; and you can keep up your rowing."



"On that duck-pond!" Tom laughed good-naturedly. "I daresay you'll find it an old rat hole, Em, and won't want it when you've seen it."

"It is in perfect sanitary condition and exquisitely kept," said Amelia, reading from the house agent's letter; "and there is a staff of servants, if we choose to take them over as well as the furniture."

"Humph!" muttered Tom. "I don't half like the idea of living among other people's chairs and tables, especially things that have been there since the Norman Conquest, some of them. The sense of having dispossessed those St. Denises will be too strong. I wonder you're not afraid of it, Em."

"Seeing that we're doing them a deal of good, I needn't be. They must want the money, or they wouldn't sell; and we can afford to give them their price. Of course, it will be hard on them leaving; but, after all, there's only this Sir Oswald and his boy. And they have a very pretty little cottage not far from the entrance gates."

"How did you learn so much, Em?"

Amelia looked slightly confused and then laughed.

"Mr. Lowther, that prince of house agents, permitted himself to be drawn into a gossip. I had no idea how I was plying him with questions till I discovered how much he had told me."

"He didn't tell you that Sir Oswald St. Denis is a confirmed gambler, and that the price of Oriels will go to pay his debts of honour, leaving next to nothing for the boy."

"Nothing so indiscreet. He only tried to soften my remorse in case we should push out those people. The poor boy! Who told you, Tom?"

"Lascelles' friend, Pontifex—with whom I dined last night at his club. He knows Oriels."

"And to think you have been keeping it to yourself!"

"Only since last night. You were asleep when I came home, and you haven't given me much chance of telling you anything this morning,"

"I suppose I haven't really. I do chatter a lot, I know. But tell me about Mr. Pontifex."

"He asked for you. He seemed to remember you very well. Several tender allusions to you impressed that on my mind."

"The little diplomat with the eye-glass, and a flower in his coat. I remember so much because he was an Englishman. And so he knows Oriels?"

"He has never been inside it. Sir Oswald has only paid it flying visits for some years back, and the boy has been at school. Sir Oswald, to do him justice, hasn't neglected the place. I suppose he is fond of it. Or perhaps



he knew it would come to selling it, and felt it would sell better as a going concern."

"I don't know. I think I should like a few cobwebs."

"You will probably get them, my dear."

"Tom, it must be Oriels. I am more and more in love with the place."

"And Mr. Lovelace Lowther of Lowther Brothers describes the opportunity as a unique one."

"His phrases are lovely, aren't they? We couldn't raise Lowthers in the United States."

"It has taken two or three centuries to raise them here. They are indigenous—like old family butlers."

"I suppose so. There will be a butler at Oriels, Tom?"

"I should think so."

"I wonder if I shall feel the same awe and delight in his presence that I did in Mr. Lowther's."

"Very probably. You would be well advised perhaps to start with new servants."

"I should never dare to refuse these, Tom. I should feel they had been there hundreds of years, and had become as much a part of it as the furniture. I should feel that I lived there on tolerance only by treating the susceptibilities of the real owners in the most delicate way."

"The real owners? The servants?"

"The servants to some extent, perhaps. The furniture even more. Surely the furniture will own us more than we it. Think of the generations of St. Denises it has seen die! I shall fancy it calculating how long the interlopers will last."

"I don't half-like it, Em. I'd rather have things I could keep in their places, animate and inanimate."

"As though we ever did keep things in their place, servants especially. I am glad you are so English, Tom. No free-born American would utter such heresies."

"Because he knows he is the slave of the help. Well, I suppose we may as well run down to-day and see Oriels."

"You have only to wire and a carriage will meet us. Do you suppose the carriages go with the furniture, Tom?"

"And the coachman and the horses? I daresay we shall need new carriages, and the horses will be rather past work. However, it will be time enough to think of that when you've found out if you can stand the accessories of Oriels. I shall send the wire, and there will be a cab at the door in five minutes."

Amelia joined him in the hall a little later than the five minutes. Looking at her Tom smiled.

It was a fine and lovely day of September, with a crisp suggestion of autumn in the air.

Amelia had dressed herself carefully. She affected delicate organdie muslins fine enough to be drawn through a ring. This one was patterned all over with leaves in all the bronzes of autumn, repeating the shifting golds of Amelia's eyes. Her hat with its sweeping feathers had the slightest touch of fur introduced. Her hands were hidden in a great Granny muff of brown velvet, fur-trimmed, which revealed a delicate lining of rose. A tiny tippet of brown velvet and rose fell back from her slender neck.

She smiled at Tom from her frank eyes.

"I called to Lowthers' yesterday in this frock," she said. "I saw the principal, as you know; and my! he did talk."

"So you are repeating the effect on Oriels?"

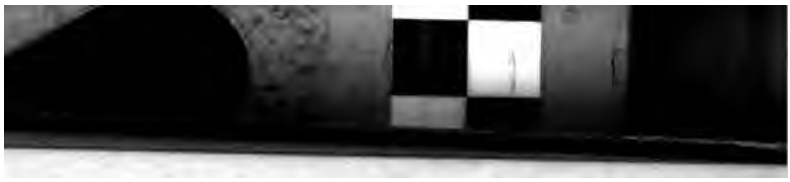
"Why, yes. I confess I thought it out. You look perfect, Tom."

"I was thinking you put me to shame by your finery."

"You never look fine, and it's dear of you. Your clothes always have the air of old clothes. I don't know that I've ever seen you looking as though you had new garments."

"I'm chronically shabby, I know."

Tom had not yet visited a London tailor, although his sister, for all her preoccupations, had found time to flit in and out of most of the renowned London shops.



"You will pass for a peer," said Amelia.

They were now in their hansom, bowling on its smooth tyres to the Northern station. She passed her hand tenderly over his grey coat-sleeve.

"You are ideally like a country gentleman," she said.

"I believe, Em," he said, laughing, "that our forbears in England must have learnt the duty of respect to their betters."

"I should hope so," she said seriously. "I should hate any horrid little Republican notions."

Oh, Amelia, daughter of the Republic!

After the four hours' train journey there was a drive of some miles to Oriels. An old coachman wearing powdered hair had met them at the station with a rather ancient landau. He had a great red face, preternaturally solemn. As they came in sight of him Amelia slipped her hand within her brother's arm and squeezed it agitatedly.

"Did you ever see such an old pet?" she whispered.

"Nothing to do and plenty of oats," muttered Tom, not thinking of the coachman. "Sides like a mountain of glass. The Oriels stables have not been starved. It is magnificent—but it is not war."

"What are you muttering, you dear owl? Do look at his powder. Do you suppose he wears it every day?"

"He couldn't do ten miles to save his life," said Tom.

"As if anyone would expect him to—or hear of his doing such a thing. Do see how he touches his hat! I should like to put him in a glass case, powder and all."

The carriage was proceeding slowly and majestically now over level roads, where one caught sight through the palings of wide park-lands, with herds of deer and little red cattle grazing in the sheltering of many a spreading oak.

"Just imagine," whispered Amelia, with the same rapt air. "We have two dukes for our neighbours, and the only untitled landowner within ten miles is the richest commoner in England. Not that we care about money, do we, dear?"

"Nor about titles," said Tom, sturdily. "I shan't mind for my own part if the dukes don't call. Or is it the duchesses that call? I'm rather hazy about these matters."

"The first thing you will have to do is to join the Hunt," said Amelia, seriously, "and pay a handsome subscription to it. Then there will be the parson wanting his church tower, Perpendicular Gothic or something of the sort, restored, and you'll plank down for that. Then there will be a ball for the County Hospital, and the duchesses will be Lady Patronesses,

and, of course, you'll take tickets and send a good-looking cheque for that."

"Don't let us overdo it, Em, dear," said her brother, interrupting her. "We don't want to buy our toleration among these people."

"Only our entrance," his sister assured him, lightly. "Afterwards, our toleration will be all right. If I were only as sure of the St. Denises' old housekeeper! And all those pokery maids. And the silk-stockinged footmen. To say nothing of the chairs and tables, and the tapestry that has been there since 1121."

"I don't suppose these people will really take service with us at all. I rather wish they wouldn't," said Tom, good-humouredly nettled.

"If they wouldn't," replied his sister, "it would be the last reason for having them. The dears! To be so faithful to the old family! I would double their wages on the spot."

"Take care, Em, take care," laughed her brother. "Brent's is a paying concern, and we have never anything like lived up to our income. Still, even Brent's might find it difficult to satisfy those rapacious menials, especially since Oriels will cost me a fancy figure."

"It must be ours complete," Amelia declared. "We must have people about us to whom the associations of the place will be as dear as to ourselves."

"You talk like a St. Denis," said Tom.



CHAPTER III

THE SIEGE OF THE COUNTY

THE Brent installation at Oriels was complete. Even Mrs. Tubbs, the black-silk-gowned housekeeper, who had appeared entrenched behind those stately garments at first sight as though they had been Elizabethan ruff and farthingale, softened before Amelia's admiration for herself and almost tearful interest in those whom she had driven out.

Amelia had listened entranced to Mrs. Tubbs' reminiscences of Master Hilary as a beautiful black-eyed baby, and had, with difficulty, restrained herself from embracing the faithful retainer. With another person than Mrs. Tubbs she would have bestowed a sovereign on the spot; but Amelia's fortunate taste prevented such an error as that would have been.

Her very unlikeness to Englishwomen of quality helped her with the domestics. She was so utterly unlike them, with their height, their sleek, comely skins and satiny heads,

their well-fitted air, their unmodulated, slightly husky voices, that in anything she did there was no comparison. Her solecisms were committed in a foreign tongue, and were not discovered.

The maids, tall, elderly spinsters, long of back and flat of chest, were won out of their austerity almost against their better judgments. No one had ever spoken to them before as Amelia did, and though it was a shock at first to be called "a dear soul" and "a good creature" by the new mistress of Oriels, it came in time to be something of a pleasure.

The Fitzgerald part of her gave Amelia that ease and humanity with her servants which is little known in England. The first time that Amelia said to Mrs. Tubbs, standing stiffly to receive orders, "Now, won't you sit down?" the good woman felt as if she would have dropped in her place. Lady St. Denis would never have said it certainly; and the good woman was torn in two between the tradition that one stood in the presence of the mistress and the tradition of obedience.

Finally she subsided on to the edge of a satin chair and wiped her forehead—a sure sign of acute mental distress, which impelled Amelia to ask her sympathetically if she did not feel the heat very much, and to offer her smelling-salts.



"I suppose it's their way, Mr. Briggs," Mrs. Tubbs said afterwards to the butler, "and a way we're not used to with our ladies, yet I'm far from saying not a good way nor a kind way —though her ladyship would have seen me drop before she noticed, that being our people's way."

It was the beginning of a certain protecting tenderness which Mrs. Tubbs presently manifested for Amelia, which had the result of making her gently but firmly keep her mistress up to the duties of her position.

"My dear creature," Amelia had said at first, with a hand on the housekeeper's sleeve, in an intimacy which Mrs. Tubbs felt to be all wrong, "my dear creature, I've no orders to give and no wishes. You've got to run Oriels for me exactly as the St. Denises ran it. How am I to know? I should go wrong every minute."

"It has been my pleasure to keep things as they were kept in her ladyship's time," Mrs. Tubbs responded, with the most delicate suggestion of a rebuke, "and I shall continue to do my best, under your orders, ma'am, of course."

"Very well, then," said Amelia, gaily. "I shall give the orders, and you will tell me what they are to be."

"There will be guests later," Mrs. Tubbs reminded her. "I shall want to know what rooms—how many——"



"Oh, I shall tell you who are coming, but as for what rooms—why, how should I know? Only that there are acres of them."

"A very proper spirit, I call it," said Mr. Briggs, "and for my part I give up my intention of leaving at the end of the month. They'd be babes in the wood without us, Mrs. Tubbs, that's what they'd be. Short of Master Hilary coming to his own, I don't know that we could do much better. And Oriels wouldn't be the same without us. Mr. Brent has been very handsome about laying down wine; listened to my opinions with a respect no English gentleman would have done. And yet no muff, Mrs. Tubbs, for he knows a good glass of port when he sees it, and he rides as though he were born to it; and Mr. Wilkins"—Wilkins was the head-keeper—"says he can bring down a snipe with anyone."

Tom's passivity won him his way as Amelia's energy did hers. Both these fortunate young people had the instinct which forbade their going very far wrong. Without a murmur Tom donned his frock-coat and top-hat for Sunday mornings in church when the natural man would have preferred flannels and the boat, for there was a late, lovely St. Martin's Summer that year. He obeyed implicitly Amelia's instructions about joining the Hunt and contributing to its already bloated exchequer, though he



made a very wry face over the sum Amelia named, not because he objected to paying it, but because he feared the suspicion of ostentation.

Indeed the Duke of Wells, who was the Master, frowned slightly when he received it.

"Does he think he's going to buy us all up," he muttered, "because he's supplanted poor St. Denis? I wonder what he's like! I daresay he'll go hunting in black broadcloth with diamond rings on his fingers—that is if the fellow ever saw a horse that he could stick on to."

"What are you grumbling about, my dear?" asked the Duchess, who was cutting out strange garments from an ocean of red flannel, while her daughter, Lady Margaret, bent her short-sighted eyes to running the seams together.

His Grace for answer flung the cheque across the table to the Duchess. They were a most domesticated family, and the Duke spent many an hour straddling the hearthrug in his wife's workroom, where the decorated ceiling and panelled walls seemed oddly at variance with the bales of red flannel and unbleached cotton, of linsey-woolsey and grey blanketing which her Grace dispensed in her benefactions.

"Mr.—ah—ah—Brent's subscription to the Hunt," he explained. "I think—ah—so much was hardly necessary."

Her Grace's eyes glistened greedily.

"He must be a very rich young man," she said.

"Better nobble him for your charities, my dear," his Grace suggested, with a gleam of humour under his frosty eyebrows.

"He might be interested in the Tapuans indeed," her Grace assented, thoughtfully. "I have sent them three thousand flannel garments in the last ten years, but with three thousand more think what a deal of good might be accomplished!"

"Undoubtedly," said his Grace, "especially in a climate which forbids the wearing of clothes, even of the thinnest description. They are turned into carpets for the king—you may be sure of it, my dear—at the coroborees, or whatever they call them, where they have human sacrifices."

Her Grace was accustomed to such gibes, and did not respond.

"The sister looked a very worldly young person," she went on. "I saw her at church on Sunday in the St. Denis pew. Her gown must have come from Paris, and the cost of it would have—"

"Oh, I say," put in the Duke, "let the young woman have her clothes. You can't dress all the world in red flannel, Theodora."

"I wish I could." The Duchess was untiring in her good deeds. "Red flannel is an



excellent thing, and Margaret owes her good health to the fact that she has worn it from head to foot since she was born—to that and to her drinking milk all the day long."

The father sent his daughter an oddly tender look of half-amused sympathy.

"I'm not so sure I agree with you, Theodora," he grunted. "Meg might look better. Milk's a nasty bilious thing for grown-up people; and as for the flannel, you ought to have stood out against it long ago, Meg. It may do for the Tapuans."

"Plantagenet!" said the Duchess, in a shocked voice, "I won't have you saying such things to the child."

"Meg's twenty-six, Theodora: twenty-six; and she's led the life of a dowd. You'll never get her married, and everything we have will go to Stanhope, whom I can't bear."

"Plantagenet, I am really surprised at you!" cried the Duchess; while poor Lady Margaret bent low over the red flannel, a reflection from which perhaps had suffused her colourless face with a dull glow. Lady Margaret had led the life of the cloister, without its spiritual compensations.

"Never mind, never mind," interjected his Grace, hurriedly. His daughter's hurt flush had disturbed him more than her Grace's indignation. "You were talking about the young

woman from Oriels, So she wears a Paris frock, does she, the minx? Pretty, Theodora, eh? What do you say, Meg? You saw her,"

"She is very pretty, father," answered Lady Margaret, looking up at him with eyes childishly innocent and pure,

"Doesn't look as if she'd join your mother's clothing club, eh?" chuckled the Duke. "Well, why shouldn't she be pretty and wear a Paris frock if she wants to? Going to call on them, Theodora, eh?"

"I didn't think of it," replied her Grace, coldly. "They look very worldly, the young woman especially."

"I thought she looked so simple and so cool," put in Lady Margaret, in a small, sweet voice. "That grey voile, and the lovely lace."

"You pay for such simplicities," said the Duchess shrewdly, "when they are Parisian. The price would have bought a good many warm frocks for the coming winter."

Then she caught her husband's eye and sighed.

"If I call," she went on, after a pause, "it will mean the county calling. In my position I have to be very careful."

"Call, ma'am, call!" said the Duke. "Give the poor things a chance! Even if the man isn't a gentleman."

"He is, papa!" said Lady Margaret, again lifting her eyes.



"Why, bless my soul, how do you know, Meg?"

"We saw him at church on Sunday. You remember, mamma?"

"I hardly saw him," said her Grace, thoughtfully. "If there had been anything to object to in his looks I should have noticed. I suppose they will be taken up elsewhere since they have money. It is a worldliness I do not approve of. Still——"

"I shall have to be civil," put in the Duke, holding Tom's cheque between his finger and thumb. "Of course it's your own affair, Theodora. I'm relieved to hear the man's not a bounder. He seems to be very openhanded. He's given Searle a handsome donation for the mending of his church tower."

"A mere fad of Mr. Searle's," said her Grace, contemptuously. "The tower is very well as it is. Who can think of such things when millions of our brethren at the other side of the world are going about unclothed? Think of the babies in the Tapuas with not a stitch to put on them when they come into the world. You laugh, Plantagenet! You are insensible to the cry for more flannel that comes home to us. They are insatiable. It shows the need."

"They trade it off for rum," said the Duke.

"If this young man," went on the Duchess

"has money to spend on good objects, it is perhaps my duty to see that it is not diverted into unworthy channels."

"Egdon mentioned to me that his wife was going to call," said the Duke, with a casual air.

Her Grace's eyes kindled.

"Mary Egdon! She will want him to subscribe to her crêche for the Maori babies. It would be an iniquity for him to give his money for any such purpose. The Maori women have nothing to do but to mind their children. I shall call this afternoon."

"Do, my dear; but don't enrol the young woman into your 'Band of Wearers and Workers,' if only because you wouldn't throw the Paris dressmakers out of work. I remember the time you liked a pretty frock yourself, and looked as well as anyone in it."

"My old worldly days!" sighed the Duchess, not looking by any means ill-pleased, however.

"Ask her her dressmaker's name, Meg, and I'll write a cheque for you, my girl. I don't see why Meg shouldn't have her chance—eh, Theodora?"

"Margaret doesn't care for dress," answered her Grace. "She prefers sober garments."

"I'd like to see her well-dressed for once," said the Duke. "Ask them to dine, Theodora, ask them to dine. There's no use in doing things by halves. I'm glad the young woman's



pretty and well-dressed. We're rather frumpish, the whole of us—rather frumpish. I don't know when I've been to a tailor myself."

"Everyone knows that a man in your position is not expected to dress well," replied her Grace.



CHAPTER IV

A DISSENTIENT

AMELIA might go on her conquering way, and Tom, being so very different from what the county had feared, might be taken to its heart in the excess of its relief: there was one person who would never forgive them for supplanting the St. Denises at Oriels.

However, as this was a very obscure little person, Peggy Searle, the Irish parson's daughter, it was not likely her rejection of them would reach the "usurpers," as Peggy called them in her heart of hearts. She did not know yet that they shared the Irish blood which made her father vaguely discredited among his people.

The day her father had received the cheque from Tom Brent for the restoration of the church tower, in which hitherto no one had felt any interest except Mr. Searle and Peggy, she had gone out to the old orchard, where she was sure of being alone, and, flinging herself face downward in the grass, had wept in the bitterness of her heart.

She had kept her countenance so long as her father was with her, rejoicing fearfully in the big donation towards the object which was dear to him, as discredited objects are apt to be to those who cherish them.

The Searles were quite poor, despite the neighbourhood of the Dukes. Never was such a be-churched country. If you climbed the smallest hillock you were within sight of a dozen church towers, stately pre-Reformation edifices, absurdly great for their dwindling congregations.

Cuthbert Searle had sometimes preached to a congregation of his wife and daughter, his own servants, the pew-opener and clerk, and one farmer's family. It was his grief that the poor would not come to his services. The little dissenting chapel on the hill drew them in, except the handful of them who were Roman Catholics, tenants and dependants of the ducal house of St. Edmunds, which had been strong enough even in the Reformation days to shelter the humble adherents of the faith which the St. Edmunds' family had never lost.

The Duke and Duchess of Wells attended Mr. Searle's church when they were in residence. But the Duchess's sympathy was really rather with the dissenting minister than with the Rev. Cuthbert, though, since a dissenting Duchess of Wells had never yet existed, it did

not occur to her to take so revolutionary a step as attending Mr. Babcock's services would have been.

The ducal attendance did not very much swell the Rev. Cuthbert's coffers. He was no courtier, to commend himself to great people, and his doctrines were of the unpractical, all-embracing kind in which it is easy to smell heresy if one has the nose of the heresy hunter. The Duchess did not at all like sitting under the Irish parson. She was often very much dissatisfied with the Rev. Cuthbert's discourses, especially since she had caught a look in Lady Margaret's plain face, a rapt and shining look, which red flannel and the South Sea islanders had never brought there. Of course his Irishism explained his eccentricities. The Duke slept peacefully through the sermons which so agitated his wife and daughter. He took his wife's word afterwards for the unorthodoxy she had discovered in her pastor's teaching; but the Duke was tolerant.

"As long as a man's life is all right," he was fond of saying, "his belief must be all right. And Searle's a most brilliant fellow. If Searle had his due he'd be a bishop. He's wasted on us rustics down here. Irish? Pooh! That's nothing against him."

The Duchess did not trouble herself very much about the Duke's latitudinarianism, having



perhaps in her heart of hearts a serene conviction that persons of the ducal quality were certain to be *personæ gratæ* to Heaven.

She was niggardly enough to the coal-fund and the soup-fund with which the Rectory helped to tide over the long winter for the miserably poor villagers. A country given over to game is not one in which the labourer prospers, and in the clean, thrifty villages there was bitter poverty of winters.

In fighting this, Mr. Searle and Mr. Babcock met for the first time on common ground. Mr. Searle loved the man and hated the minister in the oddest way. Mr. Babcock's strong sense of duty and zeal for his mission and his flock appealed to the parson most strongly on the one hand; on the other, his doctrines and the manner of their delivery were repulsive to the scholar and the man of letters, who had arrived at a comprehensive and loving religion through bitter trouble and bereavement.

There had been only two children of Mr. Searle's marriage, and the death of one, a boy, at the age of six, had well-nigh broken his father's heart. He used to say afterwards that in the ocean of his despair one plank floated to him in the belief that such pangs could not be in vain. Out of those pangs he had "found religion," he would say—quoting from Mr. Babcock's book. He had certainly found a

message to deliver to suffering humanity, which it was a thousand pities could not reach a wider audience.

He was always sure of two listeners, at least when the ducal party was in church. However his dreamy, spiritual utterances soared above the heads of his other listeners, Lady Margaret Pierpont's eyes and heart followed him, as did his own Peggy's.

Peggy's indeed was rather a personal love and appreciation, kindling her eye and warming her heart, than any such religious experiences as fell to the lot of Lady Margaret, though producing pretty much the same outward results.

Peggy was her father's champion against all the world, and especially against the Graces, who were Mrs. Searle's rich relations, Mrs. Searle's sister having married into trade and money. The Graces admired Mr. Searle very much; but some of them had a way of deploring his lax views and his unlikeliness for permanence, which highly offended Peggy.

Poor little Mrs. Searle liked the comforts which her connection with the Graces brought her. She was as proud of her husband as on the day she married him, and in her heart of hearts preferred her scholarly Cuthbert to all the worldly loaves and fishes which Minnie had obtained by her marriage. The very existence of the prosperous Graces was in a sense a

rebuke to Mr. Searle, whose ways were as unworldly as those of the Apostles.

Poor Mrs. Searle! It was hard on her to have married a man who would not collect his tithes from those who were unwilling to pay them; and you may be sure that they were a good deal more than half the parish.

The Graces, one and all, were sorry for Mrs. Searle, and it was a sorrow Peggy sometimes laughed at, more often resented.

She was a hot-headed, chivalrous little person, this Peggy, always tilting at windmills, utterly unworldly like her father, full of tender loyalties, unselfish, generous, enthusiastic.

As she lay on her face in the orchard, with the dancing shadows of the apple-tree veining her frock, her father came up to her unobserved.

"Why, what is the matter, Peg?" he asked, in much concern.

Peggy got on to her knees, and then sat down amid the wreckage of autumn, her face half-turned from her father, her hands nervously adjusting her hat so that its wide brim should shade her face from him.

"What is the matter, Peg?" he asked again, sitting down beside her on a convenient stump of a tree. It was a golden day, and the birds were singing their second crop of song. Now and again a ripe apple thudded down on the

mosses, and the air was heavy with the fumes of the bruised fruit which lay all about them.

"You are angry about the cheque, Peg," he went on, seeing she did not answer him. "Dear, you know a parson can be no respecter of persons. You would not have me quarrel with my new parishioners!"

Peggy's white firm chin, which was all he could see under the golden eaves of the hat, suddenly shook. There was a sound like a sob. She said something under her breath which he made out to be "Poor Hilary!"

"Ay, poor Hilary! Poor boy!" he said. "I don't think Hilary would want my church tower to tumble—a beautiful specimen of Perpendicular Gothic, Peggy—because these rich people have bought Oriels and cleared off Sir Oswald's debts."

"He'd no business to have debts," said Peggy, lifting up big blue eyes with a fringe of dark lashes yet wet with tears. "He'd no business to have debts and leave poor Hilary homeless."

"Ah, well, my dear, we can't judge, we can't judge," said her father. "You mustn't be too hard on poor Sir Oswald. Think how he remembered me all those years from the old Christ Church days, and offered me the living when it fell in. He was always a dear, affectionate fellow, Oswald was. What are we,

Peggy, that we should judge of his shortcomings?"

"Sir Oswald is all very well," Peggy admitted grudgingly. "And I don't forget he is fond of you, papa. Still—it is so cruel to Hilary."

"Ay, it is hard on the lad to lose such a home as Oriels. The want of the money, too, closes so many careers to him. His father used to talk of diplomacy for him. Now all that is at an end. I am glad he has decided for the army. It's a clean, wholesome occupation, and I don't know that I like any lads better than army lads. But he'll have to give up the cavalry. It'll have to be a line regiment on the roster for service in India. Dear, dear! He would have done very well in diplomacy, I think. The lad has such a soft, gentle way."

"Even the servants at Oriels have gone over to the enemy!" grumbled Peggy.

"How do you know that, Peg?"

"Mrs. Tubbs came to see mamma yesterday. She had nothing but praise for them. You know how stiff she was about them before they came. Only her idea of noblesse oblige kept her from leaving the house before they entered it. She was to give them a month's notice at once. So was Briggs. So was old Humphrey Cox, the coachman. There! They are all staying. I have no patience with such disloyalty."

Peggy's cheeks glowed like cabbage roses in the framework of the big hat and its pink lining. The silky fair hair, which was as much silver as gold, let fall a disordered tendril or two. In the depths of the blue eyes lambent fires burned.

"Well, Peg, doesn't that speak well for these new-comers? If they have so disarmed the servants, mustn't there be some quality about them——?"

"Bending the knee to Mammon, that's what I call it," cried Peggy. "I'm well enough acquainted with the look of it."

"And you think I'm doing the same thing, dear," said Mr. Searle, drawing the envelope containing the offending cheque from his pocket, and surveying it rather unhappily.

"You! you poor dear!" cried Peggy. "You bend the knee to Mammon! If you only would a little you needn't be working your poor old brains away as you do, writing all those articles and things, and taking pupils, and never having a chance of doing yourself justice in this world."

"If I do it in the next, Peg," said Mr. Searle, smiling faintly, "I shall be very well satisfied. There is one thing about us Celts"—Mr. Searle was rather proud of his isolation as an Irishman—"we must be reserved for something very good in the Kingdom of Heaven, for it is

a fact that we are seldom prosperous in the kingdom of this world. And that reminds me —these people, Mr. and Miss Brent, are partly Irish. Perhaps that explains how they have conquered Mrs. Tubbs and the others."

"They can't be really Irish, or they wouldn't be so rich," said Peggy, unbelievingly. "I shall have to go to see them. Mamma insists upon it; and you know that you and I never can resist poor little mamma. I shall have to go, but I shall hate them all the same."

"Not hate, Peg!"

"I don't see how one can love without hating. I love the St. Denises, Therefore it follows I must hate the Brents. Yes, I do love the St. Denises, even Sir Oswald—for all his easy-going, selfish ways. I will say that for him. He was never worldly in one sense, not like the others. He would rather smoke a pipe with you any evening than dine at the finest house in the county. And though it was detestably selfish of him not to marry Mrs. Giggs—at least, if it's true that she wanted so much to marry him—for Hilary's sake, yet he was justified, I suppose, from his point of view."

"He loved his wife," said Mr. Searle, gravely. "I don't know that there ever was a better lover than St. Denis. Perhaps Hilary wouldn't have exacted that sacrifice if it was true—we oughtn't to gossip about ladies in this

way, Peg—that Mrs. Giggs would have married him."

"Oh, Hilary wouldn't have exacted anything. Hilary is like yourself—not rough enough for this rough world. And he adores his father, and remembers his mother through his father's eyes. Hilary would never reproach Sir Oswald in his lightest thought, though he has gambled away all his future."

"Well, Peg, St. Denis is my oldest friend. I think you and I might emulate Hilary's loyalty towards him."

"To the extent of calling on these people?" Peggy made a wry face. "Oh, I shall do it. We never can hold out against mamma, can we, papa? She says it is no wonder you do not get preferment, you are so careless about your social duties; and that only for her we should have no society at all. Poor little diligent mamma! What should we do without her?"

"I'm afraid she is right, Peg."

"Never mind, you have the friends if mamma keeps up the circle of fine acquaintances for us. I am sure, if nothing else remembers," she went on, "that Oriels remembers the St. Denises. I wonder those new people can bear the reproach of all those silent St. Denises in the picture-gallery. I shall just go round and tell them, if I get the opportunity, that I do not forget—



especially Lady Celia, whom we used to call Hilary's patron saint, because she was so like him."

"Don't do anything conspicuous, Peg, or mamma will be put out," Mr. Searle reminded her. "She is always so anxious about us, and we give her cause, I'm afraid."

But, after all, Peggy was to do the things she least expected.



CHAPTER V

YOUNG LOVE

WHEN Mrs. Searle and Peggy drove their shabby little pony carriage up to the long red-brick front of Oriels, they became aware that they were not the only visitors. The Duchess of Wells' old-fashioned barouche with its fat greys was driving up and down the gravel-sweep, and had to take a sharper turning than the coachman quite liked to avoid driving over them.

A very smart little dog-cart was also drawn up by the sunk fence, with the smallest boy in livery holding the head of the fast-looking brown cob which was between the shafts.

Mrs. Searle visibly dilated at these tokens of other visitors. "Ah," she said, "what an improvement! It is so nice to have Oriels open once again. So nice to have a lady there. Yes, of course, my dear Peggy"—this, in answer to the unspoken thought in her daughter's mind—"I know you used to go to Oriels with your father. Of course, he is the most unconventional of men. He would

never have seen any reason why you should not go, any more than why you and Hilary St. Denis should not be always together. Still, it could not have gone on. You are a grown-up young woman now. Mrs. Giggs here, too. Well, now, that is nice of her. Perhaps, however, she thinks she may yet reign at Oriels. And why not? She is a pretty woman still; don't you think so, Peggy?"

"Very pretty," assented Peggy, keeping down an impulse to remind her mother that there had been a time when she had not objected to the close friendship between her daughter and Hilary St. Denis.

"You are looking very well to-day, Peggy," the mother went on, with an affectionate glance at her daughter. "Still, you might have worn something better than that old pink nun's veiling. It is rather faded. Yet you are quite right to wear pink; pink or blue or white are your colours. I like your hair loose like that. It is really very pretty hair, although it hasn't much colour. It flows like water, and has the faintest greeny suggestion in it."

Peggy tried to smile, but the smile came with difficulty. Her mother was always anxious about her appearance when there was a wealthy young man in question. She remembered with a little bitterness how her mother had called Hilary the son of the house—had petted and

made much of him when he was reading with Mr. Searle, and was still the heir of Oriels and destined for the diplomatic service.

She turned a tiny ring on her finger, under cover of the trailing ends of the white chiffon she had fastened about her neck with a monthly rose in the folds. No one could make such a success with a bit of ribbon or a flower or a bit of lace as Peggy could. The little ring was so small as to cut into her finger. It had a forget-me-not, formed of turquoises, with a diamond in the centre of it.

Poor Hilary! He had always been rather short of money, but he had managed to buy her the ring for her fifteenth birthday, consoling himself for its little value by recalling his mother's jewels, which his father had under lock and key, and which would all be laid at Peggy's feet one day.

He had written Peggy her first love-letter with the ring. Peggy did not know whether to be pleased or disgusted at finding her hearty old playfellow indulging in sentimentalities concerning her.

"You are a goddess," ran one of the sentences, "and I am a lumbering brute, not fit that you should look at me."

Peggy remembered then the rough treatment Hilary had been used to mete out to her, when she was a devoted, officious little girl, tramping



in his footsteps whether he would or not. She was not sure she liked the complete turning of the tables, this transformation of "the silly duffer" she had often been called into "the goddess."

However, soon after this letter Hilary went abroad with his father, and Peggy was saved the embarrassment of love-making she would then, being only a woman in the stage of evolution, have found half-ridiculous, half-objectionable.

When Hilary returned he was shy of Peggy. Never "a lumbering brute;" none but himself could have applied the epithet to the graceful, dark-eyed, soft-spoken yet manly youth.

He had been in Hanover learning the language. Peggy's wildness was delightful after the demure sedateness of the fräuleins. She had none of their accomplishments, neither piano playing nor the housewifely virtues. But with her long arms, that were oddly graceful, she could bowl at cricket and deliver most wonderful strokes at tennis. Anything that required accuracy of aim and strength of grasp she could do as few women could. She had not been trained by a father who was one of the athletes of his time for nothing. Yet masculinity was a reproach that could never be levelled against her. Despite her directness, her plain speaking, her sun-burn, the hardness of her small

brown hands, her proficiency in all masculine exercises, she was bewilderingly, delightfully feminine.

Hilary was silent with his former playfellow, and had acquired a certain boyish modesty which sat well on his charming young personality.

It made Peggy feel shy too—which she could not bear. She tried to coax her former playfellow back to his old ease, and her unconsciousness might have succeeded in time if something had not happened to put a stop to Hilary's dreams and the irresponsibility of his youth.

This was his father's sudden confession of the difficulties which for several years had been gathering about him, becoming thicker and denser with every effort he had made to get rid of them.

"I have had the most confounded ill-luck, my lad," said Sir Oswald, making his pitiful confession to his son. "I never played much nor backed horses in your mother's lifetime, at least no more than a man in my position might. You know the income was never equal, in my time, to keeping up the estate. Afterwards I was so infernally lonely and good-for-nothing without her—so lost"—his florid face for an instant was the face of a child who has strayed —"I began the thing for distraction. I had bad luck; everything I undertook went wrong.



Now it has come to selling, my lad—or your father is dishonoured."

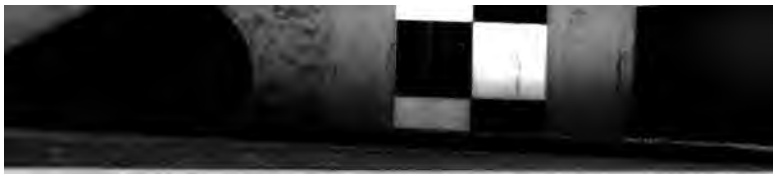
"Then we must sell," replied Hilary steadily, though for an instant the velvety brown eyes had flinched.

"God bless you, my boy!" Sir Oswald said, with his hand on his son's shoulder, and was relieved when Hilary gently but firmly detached himself and went away in silence. It is not a pleasant job to tell the son who has always worshipped and trusted you that you have been a fool, or a scoundrel, or both. It took Sir Oswald a full half-hour and a stiff glass of brandy and soda before he could re-appear afterwards even under Mr. Searle's mild, unaccusing eyes.

After he had agreed to the sale of Oriels, a subtle but perceptible change came over Hilary St. Denis. All that mist of dreams which for a while had lain upon his youth lifted. He was suddenly older, harder, graver.

His manner towards Peggy altered most of all. If before he had been plain to all beholders the boy in love, he was now suddenly come to his manhood, and in one hour he gained the look of repression which it hurt Peggy to see.

Before this happened, before Peggy understood in a flash that there was to be no more love-making, she had not been at all inclined for sentimental passages with Hilary. She wanted



the Hilary of long ago—boyish, masterful, shouting for "Peg, Peg," much as he shouted for his fox-terrier, openly condescending to Peggy's age and sex when he permitted her to fag for him, even to the extent of carrying the tin of ground-bait for him when they went fishing, and that was something which only heroic devotion would have enabled her to do.

The Hilary of recent days, very polite, very assiduous, with those shy, admiring, yet encroaching glances under his girlishly long lashes, did not please her half so well.

Yet when there was another transformation, when the oddly-changed, oddly-cold Hilary appeared she liked it none the better. Indeed, it must be confessed that she played off a great many pretty feminine tricks to break down Hilary's reserve, but without result, till the last day of his stay at Oriels came.

A good deal of his former work was of very little use to him now. He had decided on the army, refusing with a little abruptness his father's proposal that they should roam about the Continent for a while before he seriously thought of a profession.

"I have seen too much of that," said wise Hilary. "I know how a life of loafing grows on people. I am too young to begin it."

"It is all that remains to me," answered Sir Oswald, wincing a little. "I am not fit for any active occupation."



Hilary had walked over to say good-bye. Mr. Searle was out. He had gone to see his friend, Father Anselm, the Duke of St. Edmunds' chaplain. This friendship with the Romish priest was one of the stumbling-blocks of offence to the people about. They were so often seen, riding, driving, or walking together, always in eager discussion, always in the highest good humour with each other.

Mrs. Searle and Peggy were at home. Mrs. Searle received Hilary with the soft kindness which was natural to her, and which fell on the just and the unjust alike, so that unreasonable Peggy was apt at times to resent its equal distribution.

Peggy did not make her appearance for some time. As a matter of fact no word had been sent to her of Hilary's being in the house. She was absorbed in a bit of painting, and at her side of the house she did not hear the hall-door bell.

It was the merest chance that she passed the drawing-room door on her way to gather a handful of saxifrage to paint into a corner of her picture, and heard Hilary's deep young voice.

"I half-thought," he said afterwards, "that you were keeping out of the way deliberately, Peggy. I thought I should not have seen you, since Mrs. Searle had not asked me to lunch and—"



"Mamma was doubtful if the cold mutton would go round," Peggy answered lightly; "but as for not seeing me—why, papa and I should have followed you over to Oriels. As though we should let you go without saying good-bye!"

After all, Peggy had broken through the boy's hard reserve. She had carried him off bodily from Mrs. Searle, who in the matter of direct assault had no chance against her daughter.

"Mamma wants to get rid of you," she had said, "so that she can beat up the reserves for lunch. Of course you will stop. Papa will be in by that time, if his discussion with the priest doesn't make both of them forget the time. Do you know that Lassie has puppies? Come and see them. They are beauties. Not one of them shall be drowned. I've got a feeding bottle for them, little dears."

Mrs. Searle accepted the situation valiantly —vowed that she had never thought of Hilary's going before lunch, and saw the young people depart with a smile which vanished as the door closed behind them.

The puppies were inspected and admired, and from the stable-yard the couple strolled on through the overgrown leafy way that led to the wilderness—that tangle of shrubbery beside the pond.

They had begun to laugh over old memories, how Hilary had ridden the pig and the creature



had dashed with him into the pond; how Peggy had fallen from the elm-tree. Suddenly a silence came in the midst of their laughter. Peggy's broad-leafed hat drooped in its accustomed way when she was shy or had anything to conceal. While the young fellow looked at its pink bow on top, and the few clustering curls of hair on the white nape of Peggy's neck, the hat suddenly tilted upwards. Peggy's eyes, greatly daring, flashed their shifting blue lights upon him.

"Look, Hilary," she said, "look!"

She had spread out her two small white hands. There on one was the little forget-me-not ring, which Peggy had discarded since she had been a grown-up young lady.

"Peggy," he said, and his voice trembled, "so you have the old ring still?"

"I have always had it," she replied, low-voiced. "I always wore it till you came back the last time."

He seized the brown fingers in his and kissed them passionately. Hilary was fast losing his head.

"Was it that I might ask you where it was and offer to replace it by a better one? Was that it, Peggy? Why, I had missed the little ring. I was on the point of asking you to let me replace it. Peggy, Peggy, why do you make me say such things?"

He fumbled in his pocket, and produced a little case. It sprung open before Peggy's eyes. It contained an old-fashioned ring of diamonds and pearls of uncommon beauty.

"My father gave me this a little while ago," he said. "It was my mother's engagement-ring. I meant to offer it to you. Then I learnt that I was a beggar. Ah, Peggy, I ought not to be talking like this. Why did you lead me on, darling?"

Peggy held out her finger without a word. The ring went on with a little difficulty.

"So much the better," she whispered. "It will make a little place for itself. I shall not be taking it off and on."

"Till a plain one goes beside it," he said, holding her in his arms.

Peggy yielded to the tenderness of the hour. She had a thought at the end of saying to Hilary that if he found later someone he liked much better he should not consider himself bound. She was growing a little afraid of whither her Irish impetuosity had led her. Still, it was not the time for cold after-thoughts, with Hilary's kisses warm upon her lips. In permitting them had she not made it impossible that she, at all events, should retrace her steps?

A year ago; and Hilary's ring had made for itself a groove in Peggy's finger. She had had



passages-at-arms about it with her mother, but still it was there. Her father had lifted her hand and looked at it and then kissed her, after Hilary's departure. There was no announcement of any engagement, though Peggy's little world had noticed and commented on the ring.

Peggy once caught herself wondering whether if Hilary had remained at Oriels she would have made that daring advance to him. She dismissed the thought as disloyal. But there was likely to be plenty of time to think over things, since any thought of a marriage between herself and Hilary must be out of the question for years to come.



CHAPTER VI

PEGGY'S HATRED

JERRY, Mrs. Searle's pony, had clattered over the drawbridge and under the arched gateway which led into the inner court of Oriels. The house was built round four sides of a square, and the entrance was within the court.

Briggs himself came down the steps to greet Mrs. Searle and Miss Peggy. He might have assumed the Brent bondage, but he did not forget his duty to the friends of the old family. He looked about him for someone to hold the pony, and discovered a small boy weeding one of the flower-beds.

"Don't leave his head for a minute," he said loftily; "and if he wants to go round in circles go with him, or he'll be into the beds."

The small boy grinned. Jerry's ways were well known.

Mrs. Searle, with a stateliness which sat somewhat comically on her small form, ascended the great stairs to the drawing-rooms. In the smallest of these, where a wood-fire burned, very pleasant this cool autumnal day, Miss Brent was entertaining her guests.

There were half-a-dozen persons in the room, and they all looked towards the door as Briggs announced "Mrs. and Miss Searle," and the two came in, Peggy, tall and childish-looking, following in the wake of the little, round mother.

Miss Brent came to meet them, receiving Mrs. Searle with a very cordial handshake.

"I am so glad to see you," she said. "We have just been agreeing that we are too fortunate in having Mr. Searle among us. His preaching is simply lovely."

The Duchess of Wells frowned as she shook hands with Mrs. Searle and Peggy. In the first place she hadn't been agreeing, and she was the person whose opinion must seem to have been quoted. She had tried to throw cold water on Miss Brent's enthusiasm for her pastor, which had caused Lady Margaret to send her those shining glances which the Duchess did not at all like to see.

Then it was a little, nay, more than a little, presuming for this young American person, still on her probation, and with really such very odd manners, to include herself in the "we." "We" was the Duchess of Wells. The young woman must be kept in her place, even though her brother had taken Oriels and the Duke had struck up such a ridiculous friendship with him.

Tom Brent came over to speak to the new-

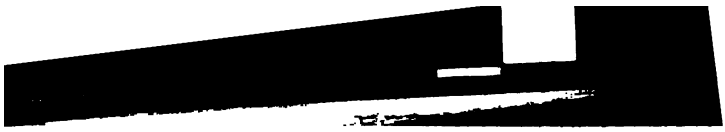
comers, followed by the Duke, who was talking so eagerly of some new American farm machinery that he could scarcely pause to say "How d'ye do?" Mrs. Giggs, a pretty vivacious brunette, flung Mrs. Searle and Peggy a greeting over her shoulder, and kept nodding and smiling till the Duke and Tom Brent had returned to their places near her.

Mrs. Giggs could enter into any subject in which men were interested, and could be trusted not to make a fool of herself either.

"You see, dear, I'm a business person," she would say apologetically to her female acquaintances when she had rushed in where they feared with justice to tread. "That is how I come to know so much about the horrible things men talk of. Brought up as you were, dear, how could you know?"

This exquisitely dainty person was, as all the world knew, dependent for her very handsome income on Giggs' Chemical Manures. The Duchess of Wells had often said that the name of the business revolted her so much that she really could not have received Mrs. Giggs if her income had been a thousand a year less.

"I'm afraid your good husband is rather poetical for me at times," her Grace said haughtily to Mrs. Searle. "For instance—reading poetry last Sunday to prove the immortality of the soul, and saying it was a finer



sermon than he could imagine. It's surely not a poet's business to give us aids to faith, but a clergyman's."

"Tom is simply gone on Wordsworth," broke in Amelia, relieving the tension of an awkward moment. "He said as we drove home that if he had the power he'd make Mr. Searle Archbishop of Canterbury, because he was the first man he'd ever heard preach from the prophet Wordsworth."

"My husband is so devoted to poetry," Mrs. Searle said, in a small, apologetic voice.

"Oh, but," said her Grace, unheeding the interruption, and addressing herself to Amelia, "your brother doesn't know perhaps that the power to make an Archbishop of Canterbury is vested in a very high person."

For a moment Amelia stared awe-stricken, then recovered herself.

"It's the King, isn't it?" she asked. "I am so glad we keep up the institution of kings. I wouldn't for anything live in a country where there was only a President, and even he was to be seen with a soft hat."

"You don't suppose, Miss Brent, that the King wears his crown always?" said the Duchess.

"I have no such illusion," returned Amelia, mournfully. "They did it in the Middle Ages, though, didn't they? It is one of the things

that always makes me want to have lived then, to envy my ancestors, in fact."

Her Grace stared. As though Miss Brent could have had any ancestors!

"The crown must be very fatiguing to wear," she said, with the air of one who has worn the ducal coronet and knows.

"Ah," cried Amelia, "and you are all for comfort. How lovely of you! That is why you have that perfectly lovely craze for red flannel. I've never seen red flannel myself, but I believe it's really the most cunning thing if you're cold."

The Duchess's frown was assuming portentous dimensions, and Lady Margaret was beginning to watch her anxiously.

"It's so beautiful of you," went on Amelia, "to interest yourselves in such things when there are so many nicer things to do in the world. Now I always want to give every young girl one really well-made and becoming frock. I thought I would begin here, and spoke to Ellison, my maid, about it, but she looked real severe at me, and seemed to think it would be a dreadful thing to do and real immoral. I think I'll have to get Lucie, my old maid, to help me. Lucie has set up for herself, and is real clever. Ellison is rather a frump. She used to be Lady St. Denis's maid, and I felt I must take her on."

"Miss Brent, you will turn their heads," said

the Duchess, severely. "Giving village girls French frocks! I never heard the like."

"Of course, there would have to be some discrimination," said Amelia, "but if you were good enough to be interested, Duchess? They would have to be good young women, I suppose, or something of that kind, though personally I should like that the poor bad ones should have a new frock too. We should have to arrange it in some quiet way, so that the thing should have no horrid flavour of charity."

"It isn't a scheme I could be interested in," replied the Duchess. "If it were flannel now, next the skin. See how they suffer from rheumatism when they are old."

"Ah, your goodness is beyond me!" smiled Amelia. "What do you think, Mrs. Giggs?" The smiling brunette had approached them. It was never Mrs. Giggs' way to neglect other women for men for too long a time. "Here am I, trying to form an association for befriending young girls by giving them pretty frocks for once in their lives, and here is the Duchess won't be my president, because she is such an angel she will only concern herself with a perfectly hateful thing like red flannel."

"It is a thing full of interest to me," the Duchess said coldly.

"I'll sew my fingers to the bone for your Grace's protegeés," said Amelia, gaily, "if

you'll only encourage my plan. I'm downright clever, too, at making ugly things pretty."

Her Grace stood up.

"I'm afraid we've been keeping the horses rather long," she said, "and Munby will be cross if we stay any longer. I wonder if the Duke has finished his conversation with your brother, Margaret, my dear."

"It's so lovely of you to mind your coachman's being cross," chattered Amelia, walking a little way with her. "We should have thought over there"—she vaguely indicated the western sky—"that a great person like you wouldn't know that such a humble creature as a coachman existed."

"Munby is invaluable," said the Duchess. "The Duke quite believes in him. You don't know what those old servants are in this country. Why, if Munby was in a bad humour I hardly dare ask for the carriage. He suffers from lumbago, and has a great objection to driving."

"Dear me!" said Miss Brent. "Then what is he good for? Hadn't you better get a coachman who hasn't lumbago?"

"We wouldn't think of doing such a thing," replied the Duchess.

"It's real sweet of you," Amelia said, looking at her Grace's weather-beaten face with sudden sympathy. "And I'll tell you what. I should



like to offer you a subscription for your charities. May I send you a cheque, Duchess?"

"My dear, it will be very kind," answered her Grace, relaxing. "But now I must really go. Plantagenet"—to the Duke—"you must postpone the remainder of that very interesting discussion till Mr. Brent comes to dine with us next week."

Her Grace swept off, carrying Lady Margaret and the Duke in her train.

"She's a dear!" said Amelia, when the door had closed behind them; "though anything more unlike my idea of a Duchess!"

The party closed up now. Amelia, returning, had slipped into the seat Lady Margaret had vacated beside Peggy.

Tom had come over from the fireplace, and was standing drinking the cup of tea which had had time to grow cold during the discussion with the Duke. Mrs. Giggs and Mrs. Searle were talking parish matters. There seemed to be a deal about babies, and Tom noticed with interest that it was apparently a very absorbing topic to the pretty widow. Her face, with its few freckles on the soft, darkly-coloured skin, the smiling mouth, the long reddish-brown eyes, almost oriental in shape, which gave it something of langour in spite of its vivacity, was full of glow and sparkle as she talked.

He glanced a little longingly towards Peggy. He thought that she was like a rose, and Mrs. Giggs like a brown pansy. The rose comparison was obvious enough. The most unimaginative could hardly see Peggy without thinking of it.

While he hesitated to join them his sister stood up, and swept Peggy off with her in the direction of the door. Mrs. Giggs' eyes invited him with an upward sweep of the long lashes. "We're talking about a family where there are nine children, and the father is in prison for poaching. I hope you don't think poaching the unpardonable sin, Mr. Brent? It is the one we can't forgive here."

"I'm not a territorial magnate," replied Tom, "and really with the pheasants walking under your feet—"

"Don't let the Duke hear you," cried Mrs. Giggs delightedly, making way for him to sit down beside her. It is only due to her to say that Tom sent no more longing glances towards the door through which Peggy and his sister had passed, nor did Mrs. Searle find herself excluded from the animated conversation which followed.

Meanwhile Amelia and Peggy had reached the picture-gallery.

"How does the place seem?" asked Amelia. "It doesn't look as if we'd been spoiling it, does

it? Mrs. Tubbs keeps me straight. 'My dear creature,' I said to her the first day, 'I want the place run exactly as Lady St. Denis ran it.' Tom wants to put in new bathrooms. He says the old are insanitary. I tell him he mustn't touch them for anything. A place like this, hundreds of years old, ought to be insanitary. I am only disappointed that it isn't dirty. If they'd only leave off dusting for a year or so! But there! That dear Mrs. Tubbs would never agree to it. Do you know, the English institution I envy you most of all is the old family servant? I was nearly saying it to the Duchess —only I thought she was rather mad with me about something."

"It's very nice of you," said Peggy, insensibly softening, "not to alter things."

"That's just what I told Tom. Tom doesn't half like it, being here in the St. Denises' place —feels as though he had pushed them out. We are only here because I wished it. Tom's the best fellow. 'Why should you and I be walking about in these acres of rooms?' he asked. 'They're too big for us, Em; that's what they are. Why can't we go and see the world—not stagnate?' There! I didn't mean to say it"— Amelia looked conscience-stricken.

"It is dull," said Peggy. "Papa has no one like himself except Father Anselm, and his friendship with him is very much against papa,

mamma says. Or at least he has had no one. He likes Mr. Brent so much."

"Tom's real intellectual," said Amelia. "But as for the Duchess—I adore duchesses, but this one would really drive me to drink if I had to see much of her, though, of course, in ways——"

Peggy laughed delightedly.

"The Duchess of St. Edmunds would please you better," she answered. "She lies on a sofa all day, and is a great invalid. But papa says she has the beauty of holiness, though she's very plain-looking."

"I saw the Duke," said Amelia, "and thought him quite ordinary."

"Ah, but he is so good," Peggy put in hastily. "Papa always says he is such a good citizen. It is the one thing in which he is not mediæval. Everything that is for the good of the country he delights in upholding, and his sense of public duty will always bring him out of a seclusion which is as delightful to him as his cell to a monk."

"Ah, that is the kind of duke for my money," said Amelia, drawing a deep breath. "The Duke of Wells now; it gave me such a shock to hear him talking of turnips with absolute devotion. He's not very unlike a turnip himself—one of the purple kind; mangel-wurzel is it? But Lady Margaret is just lovely. I'm awfully gone on Lady Margaret."



They sat down facing Lady Celia's picture. Letting her eyes rest on it an instant, Peggy sighed unconsciously.

"Ah, you're thinking of that dear fellow, the heir," said Amelia, with quick sympathy. "I often sit here for hours thinking of him myself. He must be a lovely fellow."

Peggy said nothing, but gave an absent-minded little twist to her ring.

"I envy you," went on Amelia, "being such friends with him. I wonder if he would ever be friends with us. I should just love to give him back the place, even though it's so interesting. Everything's so interesting. I'm so glad they wear smockfrocks here—the labourers, I mean; and I think those old women in the almhouses with their red cloaks just adorable. But do you think he—Mr. St. Denis—would be friends with us? I wanted Tom to ask Sir Oswald for the shooting, but he won't do it; yet he and Sir Oswald get along real well. Do you think he would come?"

"I think perhaps Sir Oswald would come."

"Ah!"

"He liked your brother."

"But the son wouldn't. Ah, well, if he comes within ten miles of us I shall try to make him forgive us. Do you know, I've learnt so much from Mrs. Tubbs and Ellison about the Saint Denises that I some-

times feel as if I were one of them. I think of them so much."

"Hilary is very sore about Oriels," said Peggy in her soft voice. "Yet I think if he knew you he would perhaps—not include you in the soreness."

"You are a darling!" said Amelia; "and I think we are going to be no end of friends."

But Peggy looked down at her fingers. She was not going to capitulate so ingloriously as all that.



CHAPTER VII

THE HOUSE-MOTHER

THE Rectory was being turned upside down for the annual visit of the Graces.

To Peggy's relief this time the party was not to include her cousin Fred—a youth who was in his father's office in the City, theoretically working as one of the clerks, for that was his father's idea, but really smoking unlimited cigarettes, reading the sporting papers, and wandering in and out of uncountable luncheon bars during the hours that elapsed from the time of his leaving Streatham Hill in the morning till his return there at night.

Peggy had taken a dislike to Fred since he had begun to pay her compliments a couple of years back. She had detected certain meaning glances between her mother and her Aunt Minnie when Fred had laid himself out to please her, which had filled her with trembling revolt and indignation and fear of she knew not what.

How could her mother, so many years Cuthbert Searle's wife, and tenderly adored by

him despite their many differences of opinion—how could her mother make a fetish of the Graces as she did?

Of course Aunt Minnie was all right. Aunt Minnie was Mamma's sister and kind to Peggy, and would bring her pretty things from Liberty's and Dickens and Jones's on the sly, for Aunt Minnie's daughters, who were pure Grace, believed in useful presents as far as Peggy was concerned, and had none of their mother's right instinct in the matter of dress.

Mrs. Grace had written apologising for Caroline and Maria, who were so caught into the gaieties of Streatham Hill that they must be excused, but looked forward to seeing Peggy after Christmas.

Mrs. Searle could very well excuse her nieces' absence. Though she never referred to them except as "dear" and "dearest," she had no real tolerance or liking for the tall, high-coloured, smartly-dressed girls, of whose lack of good breeding she was painfully conscious.

But Fred was another matter. Fred would inherit the enormous revenues of the Graces, a family of many ramifications and all moneyed.

Mr. Grace had half-a-dozen sisters and one brother—all unmarried, all possessors of wealth which grew in the night, gaining to itself other money, since it was all well invested and its owners lived in the most modest fashion.

Two of the aunts were accompanying Mr. and Mrs. Grace on their visit—much to the discomfort of everybody but themselves. The Rectory was in the throes of an autumnal cleaning, which had routed the Reverend Cuthbert from his papers, and made him a wanderer on the earth for the time being.

Peggy was always in evidence on these occasions. Peggy's artistic instincts might be trusted, and when the scrubbing women had left the whole house redolent of cleanliness and soap, Peggy came in to hang the curtains, to arrange pictures, to cover up worn chairs with bright chintz covers, in fact to give an air to everything.

It was the evening before the visitors were expected, and Peggy was putting the last touches to the bedroom of the Misses Grace.

Mrs. Searle came in, looking tired and worried, and dropped into a chintz-covered chair to the valance of which Peggy had just given the finishing stitches.

"What a good child you are, Peggy," she said, with a weary sigh. "I should never have got all this finished in time only for you. Oh dear, I am so worried. Peter is back from the station, and the hamper of meat has not arrived; and that girl, Emily, has got the shingles, and says she will have to go home to her mother."

Peggy laughed, yet there was tenderness in the laughter.

"Don't worry, dear," she replied, "I'll drive over the first thing in the morning for the meat. It is certain to come to-night. I'll be back by breakfast time. And as for Emily, let her go. We'll manage without her till the shingles are done."

"Ah, but those horrid old——" Mrs. Searle pulled herself up with a discreet cough—"Matilda and Marianne will be spying out the nakedness of the land. They see everything and make such little wretched remarks."

"Why do you have them, dear?" asked Peggy. "Why not have Aunt Minnie and Uncle Joe by themselves?"

"Oh, but they expect to be asked. They won't really spend money on a proper change for themselves, but will go to the sea in winter when rooms are to be had for a song, and broil in Streatham in summer till they're half-dead. Minnie says they really want a change, and suggested bringing them instead of Carrie and Maria."

"They'll spoil Aunt Minnie's visit to you. Why does she bother herself with them? You know how disagreeable they always are. They worry Uncle Joe so. He won't be able to drink his glass of whisky and water at night."

"No. Minnie tells me that he never takes it before them now, but has it in his bedroom. I wish they had married. They might have



had something else to think about. Minnie tells me they have discovered some kind of specific against drunkenness, which they are always trying to slip into poor Joe's tea or his soup—or even his whisky and water. She had to get really angry about it at last lest they should poison him."

Peggy laughed in spite of her annoyance.

"But why don't Uncle Joe and Aunt Minnie tell them to mind their own affairs?"

"My dear! and send all that money straight off to Mrs. George's son!"

"But why not? Mrs. George Grace is very poor; and Uncle Joe has enough."

"I should like to hear you saying that to him, Peggy. He would explain to you how big fortunes are made."

"I wouldn't bring it on myself for anything. But why shouldn't they, mamma?"

"They never would, Peggy. They'll leave their fortunes to swell another big fortune. Fred is very often very saucy to them, and drinks his glass of wine before them, though they watch him as if it were strychnine. But they love Fred as the embodiment of so much money. I often think it would be as well if Minnie were not so timid with them."

"Do you, little mother? Why don't you stand up for yourself? Aunt Minnie has allowed herself to be gobbled up by the Graces,

and you are just as bad. Oh, dear, I do wish this visit were over."

"I am sorry Fred cannot come just yet, the dear boy. He would help to keep them in order," added Mrs. Searle hurriedly, as she noticed the angry flush of red that swept over Peggy's face from chin to brow.

"I don't want Fred," said Peggy fretfully. "He's a horrid wretch."

"Oh, Peggy, he will be so rich."

"He'll need it," answered Peggy, with a mutinous mouth.

"I do wish," said Mrs. Searle, plaintively, "that his father hadn't had such ideas about the boy's schooling, refusing to give him a public school and university education because he hadn't had one himself."

"I couldn't imagine Fred at Harrow and Christ Church," said Peggy.

Unconsciously she had named Hilary St. Denis's school and college.

Her mother looked at her appealingly.

"You have all your father's unpractical ways," she said. "You think a man can't be a gentleman without certain educational hall-marks. It is very narrow-minded of you, Peggy."

Peggy opened her big eyes wide.

"I was just saying that Harrow and Christ Church wouldn't have done Fred any good,"



she answered; "or at least that's what I meant to say."

"I wish you'd remember," fretted Mrs. Searle, "that Fred is your own first cousin."

"I wish he weren't."

"You used not to dislike him so very much."

"No, little mother, I wish I could like him better for your sake now."

Down went Peggy's face over a stiff piece of chintz in which she found it difficult to get a passage for her needle. Her mother sighed. There was no use in worrying Peggy about Fred. It would not make her like him the better.

Visits such as this under discussion were a very considerable strain on the resources of Wivenham Rectory. No one but themselves knew how poor the Searles were. Those unclaimed tithes brought the Rector's stipend down to a very insignificant sum, and his writings, too learned, were not of the kind to make much money. Only Mrs. Searle knew how far her sister's presents helped them along. Those presents were the last thing Mr. Searle would have suspected. His wife was the purse-keeper, and it was surprising how easy it was to keep Mr. Searle and Peggy in ignorance of anything she thought it better for them not to know. She used to smile to herself at the simplicity of her clever husband and child; and Mr. Searle's admiration for her

management pleased her in time as though it had been better deserved.

Like many women who have known poverty, Mrs. Searle had a disproportionate respect for money. She imagined it meant everything almost of human happiness, and she had often sighed to herself, hearing her husband belittle wealth as one of the least good things of the world.

She could not imagine why Minnie should have so much of it, and she so little. She remembered the time when Cuthbert had come courting her, and the son of the rich manufacturer had presumed to lift his adoring little eyes to her tall sister, and how they had rallied Minnie upon her absurd suitor. It had been a shock to her in the midst of her own love-dream when Minnie had come in one day and announced calmly that she was going to marry Joe Grace.

Ah, well, Mrs. Searle had often thought to herself since, there were other things in the world as well as love. Her love for her husband had, of course, helped her in those constant struggles to keep their heads above water which had fallen to her almost alone. It was an article of her faith that Cuthbert should not be troubled by tradespeople's bills and such things. To her fell the pacification of importunate creditors, and the keeping

seemly of the financial affairs of the Rectory. Mr. Searle never noticed that his wife's gowns were as shabby as the furniture, never discovered that when she had a new gown it was her sister's gift. As often happens in such cases the woman, enduring heroically in silence, had acquired the little sordidness, the subtle narrowing and inclination to meanness, which are the pitiful results of money troubles.

Minnie was very good, Mrs. Searle acknowledged to herself. Yet if she had been in Minnie's place she thought she would have been even better. Minnie's handsome presents, bought at the smartest and most expensive shops, often brought salt tears of disappointment to Mrs. Searle's eyes, because the gift had not taken a money form where money was so bitterly needed.

The full extent of what her heroism saved them from was not guessed at by her husband or daughter, who, alas, saw the inevitable results without guessing at what had produced them. Neither of them would have acknowledged to each other for worlds that the little mother was just slightly too fond of money and moneyed people. Each hoped that the knowledge was his or hers alone.

One thing Mrs. Searle had made up her mind to, and that was that, whatever happened, her Peggy should not marry a poor man.

Of course, Peggy had entangled herself in that childish, quixotic love affair with Hilary St. Denis. If only Hilary had still been heir of Oriels! Poor Mrs. Searle blushed when she remembered how in the old days she had encouraged the childish camaraderie between Peggy and Hilary. Ah! that was before things had happened — things that made it almost necessary that Peggy should look with favour on Fred.

Well, her plotting and planning had resulted as she wanted it to, and Fate had mocked her in giving her her desire. Then had come Fred's fortunate fancy for Peggy—only, would it had come without any question of Hilary!

Mrs. Searle had the artistic sense. She felt all the charm and refinement of Hilary's person and manner. It was true that the Grace gold had to some extent gilded Fred for her, yet in her heart of hearts she knew how he must seem to Peggy as compared with Hilary. How she could have delighted in Hilary in Fred's place! It was her anger at Fred's shortcomings that made her blame for them his father's narrow educational views and what not. In her heart of hearts she knew that the fault lay in Fred himself.

Still, if he were twenty times Fred, with those uncounted Grace thousands, Peggy must marry him.

In that country of aristocrats, parsons' daughters and such like, admitted within the aristocratic circle by grudging courtesy, did not marry.

Of course Peggy was young. Peggy, the damask rose, might have softened the heart of the coldest woman-hater.

But the rectories about them were full of girls who had once been as pretty, or nearly, as Peggy, withering on their stems. Not one of the fine gentlemen was likely to lose his head over Peggy, though many an admiring glance went her way.

Truth to tell, the young fine gentlemen were birds of passage—drawn into the country for the shooting or in the train of some fine married lady. The resident peerage, baronetage, and gentry, with a touching unanimity, had agreed to be sonless; or their sons wandered.

No; there was no hope for Peggy. Since poor dear brown-eyed Hilary could not be the St. George to her Dragon, Peggy must marry Fred.

Why, a girl like Peggy, with the Grace money at command, could do anything—go anywhere. She could tone down Fred. And if she could not, Mrs. Searle had seen enough of fashionable society from an unimpassioned outside point of view to know that Society in the case of a beautiful woman who has married money can be generous in agreeing to the elimination of the husband.

CHAPTER VIII

THE SPINSTERS

THE visitors had arrived at the Rectory, and after the bustle of receiving them was over they were settling down into their respective places.

Matilda and Marianne had established themselves in the drawing-room, where the winter covers had just been put on to the furniture and a cheerful fire crackled in the grate.

It wanted half-an-hour of lunch time. Mrs. Searle and Mrs. Grace were shut up together, absorbed in sisterly talk after their long absence from each other. Mr. Searle's tall, lean figure was walking up and down the gravel-walk outside by Mr. Grace's squat one. The two were smoking and talking amicably. After years of acquaintance Mr. Searle had attained to a tolerant liking for the clever business man, whose world of the mind was as completely closed to him as was his to Mr. Grace.

The Misses Grace wore the frills and furbelows of the days when they had been young. They might have come out of John Leech's pictures, with their curl hanging over each shoulder, their



long-waisted bodices, their flowered silks frilled to the waist.

Each entered the drawing-room armed with her reticule, so inseparable a companion that Peggy had been used to say that the Misses Grace slept with their reticules.

It might have been last year when Sophia and Rhoda were here instead of Matilda and Marianne.

Matilda drew out a terrible-looking garment for the poor. It was intended for a man's shirt; and Peggy had a fleeting wonder as to how Matilda came to be making anything so indelicate.

"You see I am always for the useful," said Matilda, looking up and meeting her eyes; "and this is to be a pattern for the Mother's Meeting. I leave the artistic side of life to Marianne."

Peggy glanced the way of the other Miss Grace, and saw the familiar litter which Rhoda used to carry about with her last year; infinitesimal bits of silk and velvet, pieces of cardboard, tassels and tags and bobs of all sorts. It might have been last year and Rhoda, instead of this year and Marianne.

"I am going to make your mother a set of wall-tidies," said Marianne, "for a Christmas present. Of course she mustn't know anything of it, Peggy. Why, my goodness! You

haven't a single tidy in the room. No wonder it gets littered."

She looked disparagingly round the austere, elegant room, with its bits of china and old furniture, its chintz curtains, and the many vases with autumn leaves and berries.

"Your vases are very pretty, Peggy," she said. "But don't they make a great litter? Those dead leaves fall so soon; and when they don't fall they dry up."

"We don't let them do that," answered Peggy in her bright, soft way. Peggy had made up her mind to help mamma through with this visit; above all, not to let the Misses Grace spoil the visit for mamma and Aunt Minnie. "We don't let them do that. One need never take a walk here without bringing home armfuls of leaves. My only difficulty is not to turn the poor things out while they are yet beautiful."

"But isn't that great waste of time, Peggy?" asked Matilda, with a severe air. "Those leaves must have taken hours to arrange. A clergyman's daughter ought to have so many and such precious duties to perform. By the way, and how does your library go? I have brought down a new supply of tracts. I thought the old ones would all have been read by this time."

"It's very kind of you," began Peggy,



stammering, and turning from rose to peony colour.

Miss Matilda sent her a sharp, suspicious glance.

"I hope you find the tracts have done a deal of good, Peggy," she said sternly. "Your father would find a difference, a greater elevation of mind among the people after reading them. Eh?"

Peggy's long lashes went down till they rested on the soft glow of her cheeks.

"I'm so sorry, Miss Grace," she said, "but they wouldn't read the tracts. I really did offer them at the beginning, but they prefer stories. You see, poor dears, they have a dull life. 'Robinson Crusoe' or 'The Count of Monte Cristo,' or something by Captain Marryat or Jules Verne is what the men like. And the women always want love stories, or a loan of the 'Queen' or the 'Lady's Pictorial.'"

"Oh! I didn't understand that the parochial library was for the dissemination of light literature," said Miss Matilda in an icy voice.

"It would be as well, Peggy," put in Miss Marianne, "if you insisted on their reading something serious. Life is given to us for another purpose than enjoying it."

"But papa says," began Peggy eagerly, "that their lives are so dull. He thinks of nothing but brightening them."

"Ah!" repeated Miss Matilda, with a bitter snort, "nothing but brightening them! Alas! Your dear father, I fear, Peggy, has that fatal lightness of his country-people which——"

"Why, if there isn't Joseph smoking!" shrieked Miss Marianne, making a timely diversion, for Peggy's nostrils were beginning to dilate, and her eyes, usually so shy, were for once wide open with indignant surprise. "Run and stop him, Matilda. It is so imprudent of Mr. Searle to permit it, knowing as he must that Dr. Cackle says Joseph has a heart to which alcohol and tobacco are perfectly fatal. 'A tobacco and alcohol heart,' he calls it."

Miss Matilda dropped her heap of grey material at her feet, and fled majestically, giving Peggy time to cool down.

When she returned Peggy was giving an animated acoount to the less severe sister of the new sports-room which Miss Brent had presented to the Rector for the use of his parishioners — billiards, chess, dominoes, draughts, cards, what not, with a covered court for quoits and fencing for the men, and picture papers and novels for the amusement of the women.

"No wonder," said Miss Matilda, listening, "that they neglect the tracts. I shall ask Mr. Searle to insist on their being read. I fear you're too young and thoughtless, Peggy, for a parochial librarian."

"I was going to tell you when you went out," said Peggy, "that papa told me not to bother them with tracts. He said we wouldn't read them ourselves, and it wasn't right to ask them to read them."

Peggy knew from old experience that it was a mistake to allow one's self to be too much browbeaten by the Misses Grace. What the effect of this daring broadside might have been she was prevented from discovering to its fullest extent by the opportune sounding of the luncheon bell.

The two ladies stuffed their work into their reticules, and entered the dining-room somewhat stiffly.

In a minute or two Mrs. Searle bustled in, apologising for being later than her guests, her face wearing a glow of pleasure from her conversation with her sister, which faded as she noticed the gloomy faces of the two ladies.

Her eyes telegraphed an imploring question to Peggy. Peggy refused to answer it, except by an upward glance of despair. Mrs. Grace, who was too used to her sisters-in-law to be much perturbed by them, took her seat with a delicate rustle of silks. She was still a very pretty woman, a larger, more imposing copy of little Mrs. Searle, with an added stateliness derived from her white hair, which she wore high over a cushion.

Mr. Searle, with a Miss Grace at each side of him, began an animated conversation while he carved, quite unconscious of any thunder in the air.

Mr. Searle had gracious and beautiful manners as well as a distinguished presence, and the two maiden ladies, much as they disapproved of his easy-going ways and his incapacity for worldly success, gradually thawed before his attentions.

"Peggy's been telling you our great news," he said cheerfully; "the American young lady's present to us, eh? I shall have a model parish. Babcock doesn't approve; but his people come to the room all the same. Better than drinking arsenical beer at the Blue Pig, I tell him."

"Ah, that excellent man, Mr. Babcock!" said Miss Matilda, with uplifted eyes. "How is Mr. Babcock? I have brought him down a supply of reading for his people. You are, I believe, well provided."

"Peggy looks after that," answered Mr. Searle, unconscious of any sarcasm. "We were getting rather low indeed till Miss Brent's fortunate benefaction. She and Peggy put their heads together over it. Peggy knows exactly what they like. Don't give Babcock's people tracts, for they won't read them. I wonder why anyone takes the trouble to print



tracts. They are such rubbish. With our great English religious literature—"

Mr. Searle was off on a favourite topic of his, quite unconscious of the immense offence he was giving the two maiden ladies.

Presently, having finished carving the saddle of mutton, he looked round him, hospitably anxious that his guests should have all they needed.

"You will have claret, Minnie?" he asked, fetching a bottle from the sideboard. "This is very good. It was a present from the Duchess of St. Edmunds last year, when I was so slow in pulling up after influenza."

Mrs. Grace permitted him to fill her glass. She was a soft, easy-going person, over whom her sisters-in-laws' disapproval passed harmlessly.

"And you, Joe? Will you have claret, or will you stick to your whisky and water?"

"A glass of the Duchess's claret. I don't think we can refuse that—eh, girls?"

He smiled a sickly smile towards his sisters. Marianne in her heart of hearts yearned to taste that claret, if only that she might speak of it afterwards in the select coteries of Streatham Hill. But Matilda had no such temptation to backsliding.

"It will be claret to-day, and it will be whisky and water to-morrow," she said in a sepulchral voice.



Mr. Grace looked scared, and said he thought he had better perhaps stick to the excellent Wivenham water. "Under medical advice, Cuthbert," he said apologetically.

"Oh, whatever you like, my dear fellow. But the claret is really good."

"Perhaps you don't know," said Matilda, "that our brother is in Dr. Cackle's care for a tobacco and alcohol heart."

Mr. Searle's eyes twinkled.

"Not really, Joe?" he asked.

"Well, Matilda puts it rather strongly, seeing that I've always been a temperate man. Still, Cackle is an extremely clever fellow, and he says that smoking or any kind of stimulant is positively dangerous to me."

"I wish you could have the benefit of Dr. Cackle's advice, Mr. Searle," went on Miss Grace. "We think of him so highly that the members of our chapel have agreed to call in no other medical adviser."

"Dr. Cackle is an excellent judge of wine," said Mrs. Grace, in a dry voice.

"My dear Minnie, I've heard that calumny before, but I don't believe it. Dr. Cackle has said to me that the very colour of wine represents to him the hell-fire to which it has brought millions."

"Dear me! what an uncomfortable thought!" said Mr. Searle, keeping his countenance bravely,



while Mrs. Grace remarked softly that he must like the subject of meditation, since he was so fond of a glass of port.

"In fact," put in Mr. Searle, "he may be said to thoroughly take it in."

However, this very small joke offended Miss Matilda, and, by reflection, Miss Marianne Grace so much that it took the rest of lunch-time and all Mr. Searle's winning ways to make them forget it.

The afternoon was slightly rainy. Having seen the ladies established at the drawing-room fire, and overheard an observation of Miss Matilda Grace's to the effect that she never sat by a fire without thinking of the special mercy which gave it to her and withheld it from so many shivering people, Mr. Searle returned to the dining-room, where he had left Mr. Grace over his fruit.

"I'll take a glass of claret now, if you please, Cuthbert," the little man said, eagerly, as his host entered, "and afterwards you won't mind my having a little whisky and water. Cackle's an old woman—as Minnie says—and a hypocrite as well. Pleasing those foolish women—that's what Cackle's up to. Upon my word I think he's after Matilda."

"Why don't you take what you want, Joe?" Mr. Searle asked, placing the claret bottle at his elbow. "Minnie does."



"Ah, you don't know what they've been up to," said Mr. Grace, a sweat breaking out on his forehead. "You know I always had my night-cap going to bed, never touched spirits any other hour of the day—and then only the best Scotch. I beg your pardon, Cuthbert. I don't mean to say anything against Irish, only Scotch agrees best with me. Well, what do you think those women did? They got some infernal—I beg your pardon, Cuthbert—some unspeakably horrible quack specific, warranted to make you loathe the taste of any stimulant—as though I desired any such thing—and one or the other was always ready to drop the stuff in my tea, or my soup, or whatever I might be drinking. It was easily done, for it was made up in tabloids and there was always one of the sisters about, and they were all in it, the whole seven of them. They'd have made a dead man of me only for Min. Min was like a hen defending her chickens as soon as she found them out. There was near being a perfect break-up about it, I can tell you. Only I didn't want that for Fred's sake. That is why, for peace sake, I take my little portion after the women leave us."

"Poor Joe!" said Mr. Searle, laughing. "It seems rather hard."

"And they're quite capable of beginning it again, if they thought I ever drank whisky. I



always carry a little bit of lemon peel in my pocket, to disguise the odour of the whisky. Only Irish, Cuthbert? Never mind, my dear fellow. I've a few bottles of Scotch in my bag. I thought you might have only Irish. Upon my word, Cuthbert, I sometimes really wish Cackle would marry Matilda and take them all to live with him. They could poison Cackle then, and no great matter."



CHAPTER IX

THE CRYSTAL BALL

A FORTNIGHT nearly of the dreaded visit had gone by, with fewer storms and jars than had happened on any previous occasion.

"Your Peggy has grown quite a woman since last year,' Mrs. Grace said to her sister. "And how thoughtful she is—arranging things for Matilda and Marianne, so that we may be together. Do you know they are really fond of her, although they disagree on every other point? There is something very sweet about your Peggy."

She sighed as she concluded. Her own daughters had not gracious ways, and had no scruple about pushing their mother aside when she interfered with their plans and projects.

"Since Peggy is my only chicken," replied Mrs. Searle, poising a sock of her husband's, which she was darning, on her industrious hand, "it is fortunate she is a success. Peggy *is* sweet. I think most people feel it."

"Poor Fred feels it," said Fred's mother. "He says she is quite unlike anyone else. I



heard him reproaching his sisters one day because they and their friends were never out of Peter Robinson's and Whiteley's, 'and yet,' he said, 'I'd back Peggy Searle in a faded frock against the whole of you, where men are concerned!' Fred and his sisters don't get on very well. They're good girls, but they haven't conciliatory ways. Now, Peggy's little voice is like a dove's. My girls make such a clatter in the house."

"Peggy likes Fred very much," said Mrs. Searle, looking for another hole in the stocking. "He is her favourite cousin."

"She is a country mouse," went on Mrs. Grace, "and Carrie and Maria are town mice. They have no tastes in common. But Fred was always devoted to Peggy. You remember he would do anything for her, Alice?"

Mrs. Searle remembered. There had been a terrible visit of Peggy's long ago to Streatham Hill when she had been taken to innumerable children's parties; and being dropped in an unknown world by Carrie and Maria, who were among their small lovers and intimates, had suffered agonies of shyness until Fred had discovered it and had been a knight-errant, sacrificing himself to the extent of attending what he called "kids' hops" afterwards in order to look after Peggy.

The memory remained with Peggy, and



would start out of odd corners of her mind to reproach her when she was apt to be most intolerant of Fred. Indeed, Fred, grown-up, very sure of himself and just a little bit of a bounder, had no idea of how many shocks his vanity was saved by the memory of a sleek-headed cub of fourteen, with a rose in the lapel of his evening jacket, who had been the St. George to Peggy's Dragon of the Streatham Hill juvenile world.

"Peggy remembers," said Mrs. Searle, truthfully. "Your girls are very good to her. But she is still the Peggy she used to be, brought home in tears from the gaieties till Fred took her part and decreed that she should stay at home whenever she liked, and attended the parties when she did, though he felt himself so much too grown-up for them."

"Dear Fred!" sighed the mother. "He is so masculine! I wish poor Joe had some of his spirit. Though perhaps 'tis as well. The aunts take anything from Fred. I suppose it's his being the only boy in the family; for, of course, Mrs. George's Alfred hardly counts."

Her father's gay philosophy had helped Peggy to keep the peace with Matilda and Marianne.

"Let us always feel that the situation is saved by humour, Peg," he would say; and he lived up to his own wisdom, even when the



Misses Grace took to attending Mr. Babcock's services on Sunday mornings, while they sat under Mr. Searle of evenings, only to pick holes in the sermon at supper-time.

There was one thing the Misses Grace always appreciated at Wivenham Rectory, and that was, though they wouldn't have acknowledged it for worlds, the finding themselves in a much higher social atmosphere than they were accustomed to.

It was felicity enough to sit in the same room with the Duchess of Wells, who happened to pay her biennial visit while they were guests under the Rectory roof.

"How fortunate!" whispered Peggy in her father's ear when she unearthed him from the study, where he sat buried in papers to his knees. "The Duchess will keep Matilda and Marianne on the civil side for the rest of their stay."

What matter that the Duchess almost rudely ignored the two maiden ladies, talking only to Mr. Searle and his wife? The Misses Grace would not have admitted the rudeness if anyone had suggested such a thing. A duchess could not be rude, although she might be of a fine bluntness and indifference in her ways.

But Lady Margaret was almost timidly anxious to please, and looked at and admired Marianne's fancy work, and even accepted a pattern of a fender-stool from the overwhelmed



lady. How Streatham Hill should hear of the Duchess and Lady Margaret in the days to come!

Several times Miss Brent called during the month. She had taken a violent fancy to Peggy, whose little sweet coldness piqued her to overcome it. She guessed at Peggy's reason for holding out against her, and it made her friendship the more desirable.

Someone had whispered in Amelia's ear the romance between Peggy and Hilary St. Denis.

"Just think, Tom," she said, flying home with the story to her one confidant, "how delightful! Our little rose, Peggy Searle, is engaged to young St. Denis."

"Lucky fellow!" said Tom, deliberately, "to wear such a rose."

As he said it he was conscious of a little prickle of envy somewhere, as though a thorn of the rose had pierced him. Ridiculous! He had not seen Peggy Searle half-a-dozen times, and had hardly exchanged half-a-dozen sentences with her—although he had liked to watch her sitting among the more worldly women, with her big hat over her blue eyes—wonderful eyes he had thought them when he had caught a glimpse of them.

Amelia had "style"; that was the epithet the Misses Grace employed. And they were for once right, although their judgment was almost certain



to be wrong in such a matter. She had "style," from whatever source it had come to her.

Mr. Searle, who was no gossip, had for once been tempted to checkmate Matilda and Marianne. It was the evening of the day on which they had announced their intention of attending Mr. Babcock's services, and he was feeling nettled.

"Style, yes," he assented; "Miss Brent has excellent style. Blood will tell, won't it?"

"I believe they have an aristocracy of their own in America," said Matilda, who was by way of having a knowledge of the world.

"Miss Brent comes from English working-people, only a generation back," said Mr. Searle, triumphantly. "Yet she is—shall we say as good style as the Duchess of Wells? But no; that would be too ridiculous!"

"English working-people! Are you sure, Mr. Searle? I never would have believed it."

"Miss Brent will tell you herself. She is a charming creature; but, so far as style goes, I am not sure that the brother is not even better. He is as well-bred a man as I have ever met. By the way, on the mother's side they are Irish Fitzgeralds. Not that that has anything to do with it, of course."

Amelia called that afternoon, in furs and velvet that repeated the scarlet and bronze glories of the woodlands. She was exquisitely dressed.

Priceless lace at her neck and in her big brown velvet muff, a knot of scarlet berries in her hat, she looked a darling of fortune.

She was very pleasant to Mrs. Searle's visitors. Amelia had an Irish way of paying compliments as though they were irresistible truths which made delightful from her what would have been an impertinence from another.

She swept the Grace family within her net with one secure cast, not being the one to scorn the least victory. It was not only clever of her to find out what each was interested in, and to discuss that subject till it might have been supposed to be threadbare. She had really an insatiable curiosity about life; and the lives of others interested her, no matter how unlikely that might seem to the casual observer. Amelia never read—unlike her brother, who delighted in books. Her interest in what was going on about her was too keen to permit her to lose herself in the doings of imaginary persons. Her interest was the flash of genius upon dull lives, illuminating them and giving them the human qualities that never appeal in vain.

Tom Brent was present one afternoon when the insatiable Amelia had learnt all about Exeter Hall and the good men they had listened to last May, from the Misses Grace, who had a taste for every variety of Dissent.



"When Amelia says 'I want to know,'" he said in a low voice to Peggy, "it is more than a racy American phrase. Amelia does really want to know all the time."

"She drew Uncle Joe out last night on the Sugar Trust," Peggy responded. "You'd think her native element was sugar. Uncle Joe is in love with your sister, Mr. Brent; so is Aunt Minnie; so are Miss Matilda and Miss Marianne Grace."

"She has a delightful facility—more than her share," he went on, laughing. "That is why I am such a dull fellow."

If he expected Peggy to protest that he was not dull he was disappointed. Peggy was much too shy; and she was afraid of feeling or seeming to feel a too great friendliness for the Brents.

At that moment her father entered with Father Anselm whom he had picked up on the road and brought home—a pretty common occurrence.

Peggy left Tom Brent that she might give the new-comers their tea; and while she busied herself at the tea table Brent joined the two clerics, who had come in in the highest good humour with each other, wrangling good-naturedly, as was their wont, over a Greek derivation.

Mr. Searle went to find a book that should prove he was right. Father Anselm was ex-



plaining the matter in dispute to Tom Brent, who had a pleasant taste for the classics and had begun to form a library, which was a great source of anxiety and delight to Mr. Searle, and to the friar, who also had been made free of the library at Oriels, with its miles of brass-lattice-fronted bookshelves.

The Misses Grace had fallen silent, all their chatter done, as soon as the friar entered the room. They did not approve of Mr. Searle's friendship with "a Romanist priest," and, as Matilda said vehemently in the family circle, she smelt the fires of the Inquisition when rosy-faced Father Anselm came near her. Mr. Searle only made matters worse by suggesting that no creed had a monopoly of making martyrs. The Misses Grace knew that poor Alice's husband was dreadfully heterodox, and anything he was likely to say was tainted.

Finding them silent, or perhaps having exhausted the possibilities of Little Bethel for the time being, Amelia joined the circle to which Mr. Searle had returned with Liddell and Scott. No one noticed, except Mrs. Searle, that the Misses Grace as soon as they were free stalked off, carrying their reticules, to sit in their chilly bedrooms till Father Anselm should have taken his departure. And she knew that remonstrance would be in vain.

Miss Brent was a great favourite with Mr.



Searle. Her bird-like prettiness—it was the prettiness of one of the angel-birds of the Florentine painters—and her charming gowns, pleased his æsthetic sense; while her quickness and ready sympathy appealed to a clever man who lived among misunderstanding dullards for the greater part of his daily life.

They had got on to the subject of divination.

"And here," said Mr. Searle, "we find a fashionable young lady at the end of the nineteenth century carrying about with her the crystal ball of the wonder-workers of the Middle Ages."

He lifted the heavy glass ball which was suspended from one of Amelia's innumerable jewelled chains. The priest came nearer to examine it.

"It is full of rosy-coloured dreams," he said, peering into it. "Is that what you find in it, Miss Brent?"

"I'm just mad with it," said Amelia. "It tells me nothing. I bought it from a wicked old Jew in Genoa, when I was in Europe three years ago. He said I would see the future in it; but I never have seen anything, except just those rainbow-coloured things. I shall break it some day."

"Why, Em, I thought you were so fond of your magic crystal?" said Tom. "What have you been trying to find out in it that it won't tell you?"

"Never mind. I believe it's only a common glass ball after all."

Amelia poised it in her palm and looked at it. It was perfectly round, and rather inconveniently large to be worn as she was wearing it.

"I shall fling it into the lake among the water lilies one day," she said, quite petulantly. "Whatever virtue it once had I believe has escaped it. It tells me nothing."

"I believe my sister is in earnest," laughed Tom, half in wonder. "You will have to take her in hand, Mr. Searle—or you, Father. She's horribly superstitious.

"The New World wearing the cast-off rags of the Old!" said Amelia, letting the ball drop to its place, where it hung suspended by a double chain.



CHAPTER X

FRED

THE Misses Grace had gone on to pay a visit at Whitby, and the Rectory breathed freely once again, For a whole month the evening game of whist, which was Mrs. Searle's great relaxation, had been forbidden, the reading of the novels from Mudie's had been done on the sly. For a month Mr. Grace had kept an enforced total abstinence at meals.

The evening of the day upon which the ladies had taken their departure was a festive one. Mr. Grace remembered that he had brought down a small case of wine as a present to Cuthbert, and hoped to see some of it drunk before he left, so that he might be sure it didn't all go to Cuthbert's sick people.

There was a bottle of champagne broached at dinner. Mrs. Grace, in her soft-spoken, easy way, put into speech the thought which had been setting dimples in Peggy's cheeks, and something that corresponded to their significance at the corners of her father's lips.

"Those poor girls!" said she. "If they

could know, poor things! It might seem almost as if we were rejoicing at their absence."

"They wouldn't let you rejoice in this way, in their presence," said their brother Joe, gruffly.

He liked Cuthbert Searle, and was beginning to resent the bondage in which his sisters had kept him during the visit. Mr. Grace was always a revolting brother when he was away from his seven sisters; but the voice and eye of any one of them was sufficient to reduce him to submission — although theoretically they adored him as the male head of the house, and the theory was the one thing which reconciled their brother to his subjection.

He himself had a belief that if he were once to become angry he might do dreadful things in the way of violence. Indeed, there was a tradition in the family that once, long ago, Mr. Grace had flung an impertinent servant downstairs. Mrs. Grace frankly disbelieved it, and referred to it when with her sister as the great Joe myth. Yet it served with the young people, she said, to enforce a certain measure of obedience. And when she heard her husband remark to Mr. Searle that he dared not grow angry with the girls because, by Jove, he never knew where his anger might lead him, she only dimpled a little over her fair matronly face, and telegraphed something with her eyes to Mrs. Searle.



But Peggy's bombshell was yet to come.

The house had not breathed freely for four and twenty hours when Mrs. Grace, looking up from her home letters with a radiant face at breakfast-time, announced that they were to expect Fred that very day.

Joy made her indiscreet. She was as well-bred a woman as her sister, and her sojourn among the Philistines had left few traces. Yet she could not resist a roguish glance at Peggy.

"The poor boy!" she said. "I wonder if he supposes that I shall put down his coming to filial duty."

"I thought we weren't to see Fred for some time," said unconscious Mr. Searle.

"Fred knows what he's about," chuckled the father. "Catch him coming while the aunts were here! Fred knows a trick worth two of that!"

"His aunts never worry Fred," said Fred's mother proudly. "Fred takes his glass of port before them and smokes his cigar and does pretty well as he likes."

"Ah, but, by Jove, Fred wasn't brought up with them," Mr. Grace put in. "It's an awful thing to have seven sisters older than you, and every one of them fancying that her mission in life is to keep you in the straight path."

"Fred plays golf, of course," said the Rector. "Or is he too young?"



"Bless you, no. It isn't a fogey's game any longer," Mr. Grace replied. "Fred belongs to a very good golf club. It's rather expensive, for the young dog plays golf, like everything else, in the most expensive fashion. You don't find him carrying his clubs; and he loses a good many balls. Still, he meets some very good people on the links, and I don't grudge it to him."

"I should think you didn't. Your only son!" interjected Mrs. Grace.

"We must find out what we can do to amuse Fred," Mrs. Searle said, turning somewhat anxiously to Peggy.

To Peggy's disgust the roses of her cheeks had deepened since that first significant glance from her aunt's eyes. And there the colour had stayed, to her further indignation and disgust.

"Never mind," said Mrs. Grace. "Fred won't find it dull, I promise you."

Fred was expected at lunch-time. Before that hour Peggy dressed herself carefully in an unbecoming dress of rough grey tweed, which had been sadly mishandled by a village dressmaker. It wronged even Peggy's pretty figure, and made the hardest possible setting for her face.

"I am like St. Ursula and her Eleven Thousand," she said, smiling to herself in the glass,





and then added under her breath, "I do hope no one else will take it into their heads to call this afternoon."

Mrs. Searle frowned a little as Peggy came gliding into her place at table with that almost soundless step of hers.

Fred was already there, a rosy-cheeked, loud-looking youth with protuberant eyes and a mouth too much pushed forward, revealing as he laughed a row of large white teeth.

The eyes had a good-natured expression, and the face was an honest if not a very distinguished one. But Fred had the misfortune to wear exaggerated clothes. Whatever his tailor told him was going to be the fashion Fred must have on the spot. A curious kind of shyness kept him from going to a really smart tailor, who would have turned him out quietly well-dressed. He chose rather one who made for lively young city men; and since Fred's own tastes were assertive the results were sometimes melancholy. To-day Fred's clothes, as nearly azure as he could get it in a tailor's pattern-book, and a peach-coloured tie, made the well-meaning face, with its sprouting moustache, vulgar.

"Well, Cousin Peggy," he said, leaving his place to greet her, "I thought you would have come to meet me. Been district-visiting, eh?" He cast a disparaging eye over her frock, which he felt to be unsatisfactory. "You look very well; quite got up for tramping the muddy roads."



Peggy dropped his hand and sat down quietly to her soup. He went back to his place, and began to rattle away in the style which delighted his mother and father. Mr. Grace, theoretically strict, but really the most indulgent of parents, plied the lad with questions and heard the answers with delight.

What had Fred been doing? How were the girls getting on? What had they been seeing lately? Who had been visiting them?

Fred had been seeing everything that was to be seen, and was not slow in telling these rustics all about the theatres he had been at, the football matches he had watched, the result of the latest billiard tournament, the new Spanish dancer at the Levity. Fred, the transparent youth, had nothing to conceal, and rattled over his impressions and his little experiences with an innocent certainty of pleasing.

"Fred is very emancipated," his mother said apologetically, when he began to describe the gyrations of "La Bella Marta." "He tells me everyone goes to the music-halls nowadays."

"If I had gone to see a play of Shakespeare's when I was his age," chuckled his father, "my old dad would have flogged me within an inch of my life and cut me off with a shilling afterwards."

"The world has been getting on since your time, pater," smiled Fred, who was nothing if not a man of the world.





Mr. Searle listened to Fred's babble with a perfectly gentle intolerance. He had had to do with a good many schoolboys in his time, and had found them mostly vacuous and uninteresting. He used to say that if a schoolboy was pleasant it promised great things for the man, and referred to the schoolboy stage as the grub stage, in which every promise for the future was folded away in an enshrouding drabness.

For his sins here was Fred, an exaggerated specimen of the schoolboy, and of an objectionable kind—indeed, what schoolboy would dare to be so egotistic?—thrust upon him for several days to come.

Mr. Searle was usually silent while Fred babbled. He noticed, with the quiet irritation which was his nearest approach to anger with his wife, her empressement towards her nephew. Fred was enjoying himself highly since he dominated the conversation. He was not awed by Cuthbert Searle, as a more sensitive youth might have been. Indeed, in the family circle he was wont to refer to Mr. Searle as "a good-natured old buffer," who, in his opinion, wanted a bit of waking up.

Peggy, after a glance at her father's patiently courteous face, ate her lunch with her eyes fixed on her plate. Inwardly she was raging against Fred and Fred's ways. Of course, Fred was



very much the best of the Graces, excepting, of course, Aunt Minnie and Uncle Joe; of course, he had been very good to her in that horrible time long ago, when she had been dragged at Carrie's and Maria's chariot wheels.

Still, . . . how was it that the very names of Fred's intimates were depressing? Charley Wicks, Joey Harris, Ernest Gapp! It must be a sordid, overblown, noisy world in which youths like Fred and the possessors of those names were to be found.

Now he was telling how his sisters had picked up some new friends—the Wigginses, of Snipe Wiggins, Mincing Lane—and had been at their house, a stunning place over at Haverstock Hill.

There was to be a ball, and Carrie and Maria had been pledging their father's credit ruthlessly at Peter Robinson's.

"The girls are determined to live up to the Wigginses," said Fred. "Very fine girls, the Wigginses, though not my style,"—with a glance at Peggy's downcast eyes.

"And why not?" asked the father. "We can afford to have our girls dress with the best, eh, Min?"

"It is well the Aunts didn't hear you," laughed Fred, noisily. "Rhoda was in the other day when they were chattering over it, and told a yarn of how she and the others had



bought a hundred and twenty yards of muslin for twelve-and-six the summer before last, and made all their frocks out of it."

"The more of that they do, the better for you, my boy," commented Mr. Grace.

Mrs. Searle had been sending anxious looks towards her husband, as the conversation, of purely restricted interest, lengthened out more and more. He was plainly weary; and presently he might get up and go out, or show his weariness in such a way that it must be apparent to Minnie. Mr. Grace and Fred had a comfortable insensibility to anything but a very direct expression of opinion. It was time for a diversion.

"You are going to Oriels this afternoon, Cuthbert?" she asked.

"There was something about it," replied Mr. Searle, passing his hand over his forehead in a tired way. "Brent asked Anselm and myself to see the collection of breviaries he has just bought. Do you feel like the walk, Joe?"

"I don't mind," answered Mr. Grace, mixing his second glass of whisky and water.

"And Peggy? There was something about Peggy going. You had better all four go," went on Mrs. Searle, with a shade of anxiety in her expression, "and leave Minnie and myself to chat over the fire."

"I'm not going," said Peggy, with a sudden



flush. "I promised to go to tea with Martha Gurney."

"But Martha would not look upon it as an engagement. You can go to her any day. Fred would like to see Oriels. He has never been there; and it is such a historic house."

"I don't care a bit," said Fred, gallantly, "so long as I go with Cousin Peggy."

For a second Peggy trembled with an indignation foreign to her natural gentleness. She had been going to Oriels, and she would not acknowledge to herself that tea at Gurney's Farm was a poor substitute. She was moved to say that Martha would not expect Fred, and would be embarrassed by his presence. What did she care if he went to Oriels, so long as she was not present? Why need she mind if Amelia's unfailing interest should draw Fred into vivid accounts of himself and his pals, so long as she need not listen?

She lifted her eyes slowly and met Fred's colourless, guileless, good-natured orbs fixed upon her.

"Very well," she said, resignedly. She had had a sudden glimpse of the Fred of long ago, who hated girls, and had only a tolerant kindness for herself. Why couldn't he have remained like that and not grown up?

"Very well," she said, with a gentleness in which Fred was not the one to detect the note



of resignation; "very well, then Fred and I will go to tea at the Farm."

"Miss Brent will be so disappointed," protested Mrs. Searle, who was always eager that the Graces should have the best of everything.

"Martha will be pleased," said Peggy, obstinately. "And Martha, after all, is the oldest friend."



CHAPTER XI

THE RESCUE

When Peggy was putting on her hat at the glass in her bedroom she saw through the low window-panes her father and Mr. Grace set out on their walk to Oriels. She watched the two grey-clothed figures out of sight—it was one of Cuthbert Searle's sins with the orthodox that he would never wear his "regimentals," unless when he was obliged to, and the Rector of Wivenham might have passed for a layman any day—feeling the passionate disappointment of her youth that she was not to accompany them. And, after all, she reminded herself, she need not have been so particular about Fred, seeing that the Brents were of so humble an origin and were not ashamed of it. Had she not heard Amelia tell the Duchess delightedly of the little mill cottage where she had been born, and where her grandmother had "done her own chores," as Amelia expressed it?

However, it was too late now to look back, and anyhow— . . Oh, Peggy might have borne Amelia's encouragement of Fred, if that



fatuous youth could be supposed to need encouragement. What she could not have borne was that Fred should parade his foolish admiration for herself under Tom Brent's quiet, humorous eyes. With a sudden impulse she flashed Hilary's ring in the low, afternoon sunlight. Then she kissed it. How dared Fred pursue her! Even if he knew nothing of Hilary, he might know she was not for him. She thought proudly of Hilary's dreamy poetic face, his graceful air, his gentle manners. How horrible Fred seemed by contrast, was Peggy's exaggerated thought.

They set out together, walking briskly. Peggy, graceful as Atalanta, could walk like that golden girl, distancing with her swift, gliding step, a good many male competitors.

Something, she knew not what, stronger than her affection for Aunt Minnie, quite beyond any reluctant liking and gratitude she might feel for Fred apart from his grotesque fancy for her, made her shrink from bringing matters to a crisis with Fred. If she were to offend him—and Fred had monstrous vanity to be shocked despite his good nature—something might happen—something, she knew not what, only that terrified hints of it had reached her lately in her mother's speeches. For some reason she must not offend Fred openly. There were reasons Peggy knew nothing about. And Mrs.



Searle's hair was whitening every day, her face growing smaller and more pinched.

Fred was not likely to miss Peggy's conversation. He had always enough to say for himself, and would have scorned any youth who couldn't find plenty to say to a pretty girl. The landscape was full of the colours and scents of autumn, all the browns and golds and crimsons of gillyflowers and wallflowers, an aromatic smell of gorse and dead leaves. Peggy gathered an armful of leaves and berries as she went, and forgetting her vow to be at her ugliest for Fred's eyes, she fastened red briar leaves and blackberries in her bosom, and twined a long spray of the briar in her hat.

She was recalled to herself by Fred's admiring eyes and his speech.

"By Jove, Cousin Peggy, you do look jolly!"

Then she blushed with anger and annoyance —the more that she knew Fred would ascribe her colour to a reason flattering to his own vanity.

She lingered no more by the hedgerows, in the green lanes where the bronze pheasants strutted almost under their feet, but walked so fast the rest of the way that Fred arrived puffing and panting, yet manfully striving to finish the anecdote which he was in the act of telling Peggy when Gurney's Farm came in sight.



Martha Gurney was delighted to see Miss Peggy and the young gentleman. She brought out her finest linen and silver to do them honour, and her mother's green Coalport cups which were reserved for the greatest occasions.

Peggy had not outgrown her childish delight in a visit to Miss Gurney. It was impossible for a healthy young woman to sit down to that well-spread board without feeling some appetite for its dainties.

"You must remember we dine at half-past seven, Martha," said Peggy, her eye wandering over the boiled eggs and cold ham, the home-made bread, the cream and butter and honey and jam, to all of which she was expected to do justice.

"Plenty of time for another appetite, my dearie," answered Martha, setting herself down behind the big china teapot.

However, Fred would not drink tea, which he considered only fit for women. He had been smoking cigarette after cigarette during the walk, so that he had no appetite; and his failure to do justice to her good things somewhat distressed Miss Gurney.

Instead of tea Fred sipped a glass of cowslip wine.

"Ah, Miss Peggy, why don't you come oftener?" Martha asked, cordiality beaming from her little withered apple of a face.



"You're a grown-up young lady now, and have little time for old friends. 'Tisn't like old times, when you and Master Hilary used to come so often."

"I wonder you didn't shut the door on us, Martha," laughed Peggy.

"And you would have your tea in the woods," went on Miss Gurney. "And d'you remember the day Master Hilary fell in the horse-pond, and what a sight he were, all his nice new suit all over duck-weed and all kinds of muck?"

Fred listened with a frown. He had not seen Hilary St. Denis since they were both small boys; but he had conceived then an instant aversion for the refined, well-mannered boy, whose ways were so different from his own.

He took no interest in Miss Gurney's household animals, the tabby, and the fox-terrier, and the canary, which were all so many old friends to Peggy. He walked unwillingly at her heels to the stable, where Dobbin had to be petted, and the sheep dog had a little litter of puppies to be handled and praised, to the great excitement of the handsome mother. Fred could not be expected to be interested in the fact that Sukey had a calf, and he knew nothing about pigs, so could not be delighted, as Peggy was, with the great, fat, ugly brute that could hardly turn round in its sty.



All this time, too, Miss Gurney's conversation contained reference after reference to Master Hilary.

At last Fred grew sulky and went away to the front of the honse, where he leant against the palisade smoking, and wondering gloomily when Peggy would be done with that old girl.

He began to feel a sense of injury. When Peggy had chosen his company and the farm-house tea, rather than an afternoon with "toffs," as Fred put it, he had thought slily that he discovered in the otherwise inexplicable choice a design of Peggy's to get away from the old folk and have Fred to herself. To humour that pretty plan of hers, he had consented to the change of venue; though, hang it all, Oriels was more in his line than a mouldy old farm-house, with its smelly outbuildings. Peggy had given him no chance for love-making on the outward walk. If it was going to be the same kind of rush homeward he should begin to feel sorry for having left so many good things and so many girls who appreciated him at Streatham Hill.

He looked with disgust at his patent leather shoes, on which a good deal of mud appeared. It was all very fine for Peggy in her rough clothes—Peggy was not half so pretty as she had been in his memories of her—to go tramping over field paths and through sodden woods



and miry lanes. He'd be hanged if he was going to do it again.

Peggy's soft voice at his elbow interrupted these gloomy thoughts.

"I'm afraid I've kept you too long, Cousin Fred," she said dulcetly, "and we shall have to hurry, for it is growing dark."

He turned round, only half-willing to be won out of his sulkiness.

"You were so long over your inspection," he grumbled.

"Ah, but, as Martha says, I have been so long away. You must forgive me, Fred."

With a better grace he lifted his hat to Miss Gurney, who was waving her hand to Peggy from the house-door across the beds of the kitchen garden.

After all, Peggy was Peggy. She had a way with her which Fred had not known in other girls; and his face brightened. His old conceit of himself returned. He had been an ass to worry himself about that fellow, St. Denis. Weren't they ruined and gone out of the country, poor beggars? Fred could afford to be magnanimous, seeing how the firm of Grace & Danby was rooted in the history of British commerce.

Peggy had realised that she must not offend Fred. Poor mamma had seemed so alarmed lest she should. After all, it was easy to make



him happy by drawing him on to talk of himself. There need be none of the dangerous pauses which might incite Fred to something she could not have endured.

The shades of evening gathered thicker about them in the overgrown, grassy way they were following. A high park wall went with them on one side of the way. Suddenly Peggy stopped.

"Are you inclined for a short cut, Cousin Fred?" she asked.

"Not that I find the way too long, Cousin Peggy!"

"By getting over the wall here and crossing the park of Oriels we shall cut off a big corner —about a mile and a half."

"But how are we going to get over?"

Without a word Peggy put her foot on a shelving stone of the wall, on another, and was on top, smiling down at Fred in a way which, despite the gathering gloom, or perhaps because of it, he found bewildering.

"I am coming, Cousin Peggy," he answered, beginning to ascend cautiously.

She was on the ground at the other side before he was on top, and was waiting for him when he had made the descent rather clumsily, barking his shins in the process. But Fred had no care for his shins, or for the ill-treatment his clothes were suffering. He was intoxicated



with Peggy's smile, wondering whether it was the moment for love-making.

They set out across the park, which was now becoming grey with mist.

"I suppose you know the way, Cousin Peggy?" said Fred, doubtfully, "for I am all in a maze."

"Trust me," she answered, gaily, "to get you home safely."

"Trust you!" he repeated. "I say, Cousin Peggy, I shouldn't mind if we were to be lost in the mist. It would be really jolly, with you for company."

The mist grew thicker and thicker, and rose about them like a great white wall. Peggy went so quickly that Fred had something to do to keep her in sight, for if he lagged a second the mist seemed to swallow her. She kept calling out warnings to him, trying to keep him to a path, imaginary so far as he was concerned, Now and again he plunged into a soft spot, and was mired over his shoes and half-way up his fine silk stockings.

Fred began to grow cross, the more as Peggy did not seem the least in the world perturbed. Her soft calls came back to him out of the mist, Once or twice even he imagined that she was laughing at him. He wished to goodness they had kept to the road and not taken this confounded short cut.



Fred was no milksop. With a girl who would have clung to him he would rather have enjoyed the adventure, trusting to luck to find a way out of it. But with this elusive Peggy it was another matter.

Suddenly she stopped and came back to him.

"How deceitful the fog is!" she said. "I thought I could have found my way blindfold here. But I am a little out of my bearings. Let me see; the fence by which we get into the avenue of Oriels must be somewhere to the right."

"I am going to light up anyhow," answered Fred, resignedly. He felt in better humour now that Peggy confessed herself at fault.

"It is such a bother," Peggy went on irritably. "We ought to have left Martha's sooner; yet only for this wretched fog we would have had some daylight for half-an-hour yet. Hush!"

She put her hand on his arm as he struck the match, and the flame of it shot up in the mist.

"What is it?" he asked, dropping the match. Peggy was pressing his arm so hard that she hurt him.

"Don't you hear anything?" she asked in a whisper, drawing him with her.

He listened and heard the sound of a herd feeding.

"What is it, Peggy?" he whispered back, becoming infected by her evident alarm.



"It is Mr. Brent's herd of wild cattle. I ought to have remembered them. They are dangerous. Come this way"—she took his hand in a soft clasp—"they may not have heard us."

She drew a step or two away from the direction of the cattle. But suddenly there came a sound more ominous—the low, angry roar of a bull.

"We must run for it, Fred," she whispered, drawing him with her. "If we could only see where we are! It is not only the bull, but if the herd should stampede our way, they would trample us down. Ah!"

She turned round as she spoke. Something was charging out of the mist towards them. They could discern the shape of the bull, his huge head and shoulders inclined their way. Within a few feet of them he paused and began pawing the ground, bellowing angrily and tossing his great head hither and thither. Beyond, they could hear the herd rushing together in terror.

Fred stood paralysed. He was not destitute of physical courage, but this was an experience for which he had had no preparation. He half-guessed that the bull was at fault; but presently he would charge again. Any movement of theirs would bring him upon them. And any second they might hear the thud of the flying herd.



They stood watching the bull as he seemed to toss the mist from his horns for a breathless second. Then Peggy let Fred's hand drop, and he was conscious that she was retreating step by step, backwards, taking off her jacket as she went. Instinctively he too began to retreat. There was a sudden silence. The bull had heard them. With a deafening roar he charged towards them.

At the moment a figure rushed between them and the bull.

"Make for the fence; it is directly behind you," shouted the new-comer, flinging something towards the bull. They ran then with a will. They were at the fence when they heard the thudding of the wild cattle behind them, mingled with the furious bellowing of the bull.

A six-foot fence and heavily tarred. They never heeded that. Peggy had had the country-girl's training in climbing fences. Her foot was on the first bar, on the second, on the third. She was over. Fortunately the tar was not too fresh to interfere with her climbing. But quick as she was someone was before her. Someone lifted her to the ground.

"Are you all right, Fred?" she cried, panting.

"Pretty well. My clothes are ruined," grumbled Fred at a little distance, coming down the hither side of the fence.



Peggy turned wondering eyes to the figure beside her.

"You came in the nick of time," she said.

"But the bull has my coat," answered Tom Brent's quiet drawling voice.

Peggy laughed out in the plenitude of her relief. Tom Brent had never heard her laugh before, and thought how delightful it was in its suddenness and joyfulness.

"So it was you," she said.

"It was I," he answered. "It was the least I could do, seeing they were my cattle, to be on the spot. I had walked part of the way home with your father, and was coming back when I heard the bull roaring, and knew something, someone must have got in his way. You don't feel like—like fainting or anything, Miss Searle?"

"Not a bit. But I am forgetting. My cousin Mr. Grace—Mr. Brent."

Tom Brent lifted his hat.

"I am so sorry for this misadventure," he said, "and I'm afraid my fences have been treating you scurvily."

"Never mind," answered Fred. "One can't think about one's clothes after an escape like that. You country people have the advantage of knowing what to do in such a case."

Fred was a little sore over his own unreadiness.

"It was only to give the bull something to tear up. Luckily we were near the fence or



the herd might have come rushing upon us. The fence turned them."

"Ah, but you are without your coat," Peggy said suddenly, with a light touch on Tom Brent's arm that sent a thrill through him. "You are without your coat—in this damp mist, too."

"I shan't take any harm."

"But you must hurry home; and all our thanks shall wait for afterwards."

In the feeling of the moment Peggy, usually so shy, thrust a soft hand into his.

Again he felt something like a shiver rush through him; but it was not from cold.

"Well, good-bye," he said, pressing her hand, and then relinquishing it. "I shall come to-morrow to ask after—the clothes. Good-night, Mr. Grace, and forgive me."

"Good-night," answered Fred, rather sulkily. He had a half-idea that the reference to the clothes might mean that Tom Brent was laughing at him—which was quite unjust.

CHAPTER XII

FATHER AND SON

It was true that the St. Denises yet retained a pied à terre in their native land, in the shape of a cottage which stood in its own green garden about a quarter of a mile from the back gates of Oriels.

It was a very pretty cottage, red-walled and red-roofed, though little could be seen of roof or walls for the mass of creepers and climbing roses which had quite enfolded it in soft draperies of green. The little lawn about it was like velvet, thanks to the head gardener at Oriels, who made it his special care; and the cottage was kept clean and aired from year's end to year's end by Susan Sweet, who had been Hilary's nurse and was yet a comely woman of middle age and an excellent cook.

One November evening Susan was in a great state of excitement, and the cottage glowed inside and outside with fire and lamplight. A thick privet hedge screened it, and the path from the little gate wound so cleverly amid Portugal laurels and various flowering shrubs



that the cottage might have been quite a distance in from the road.

Sir Oswald and his son had arrived that evening, having given only a few hours' notice of their coming. Not that Susan was to be found napping. The market-town was not too far away for a willing messenger to travel there and back in a couple of hours, and there were plenty of willing messengers when it was a question of welcoming home Sir Oswald and his son. It was now eight o'clock in the evening; and Susan's niece Jane, pressed into the service of the Red Cottage for the occasion, was just setting the soup on the table. It was a favourite soup with Sir Oswald, and there were a slice of turbot and a brace of pheasants to follow.

The late master of Oriels could not have fared better if he had accepted one of the many invitations to dine held out to him when he had called at his club that afternoon.

Despite his misfortunes St. Denis was a popular man with men, and well-liked, even loved, by women. It was his own fault that he had not retrieved his gambling losses by a rich marriage; nor need his choice have been restricted to one lady, if the gossips spoke truly.

As the gong sounded, father and son, coming from their respective bedrooms, met at the head of the stairs. They were very much alike to look at in features, but Hilary's brown eyes and

his gentle expression had come to him from his mother. His resemblance to her was strong enough to make his father sigh wistfully when they sat opposite each other in the silence which is the best proof of thorough understanding.

They had dressed for dinner. No amount of hard luck would have made a sloven of Sir Oswald, who would as soon have thought of sitting down to dinner in a shooting-jacket as of wearing evening dress in Pall Mall of an afternoon.

They came downstairs side by side, alike even to the stephanotis in their coats, which had been thoughtfully provided by the head-gardener of Oriels, who had sent such a basket of flowers to the Red Cottage that day as Amelia, with all her coaxing ways, could hardly have won from him. The St. Denises certainly were well loved by their late dependents.

Susan Sweet opened the kitchen door cautiously as they passed, and looked after the father and son with a broad smile of affection lighting up her homely face. She watched them into the dining-room before she went back to lift the turbot on to its dish.

"Bless them!" she said to herself. "'Tisn't boxed up here they ought to be. The Red Cottage is no place for the St. Denises."

And then she breathed a sigh to the memory of the good days at Oriels that were over.



It was a remarkable thing that even this devoted adherent of the old family had neither hatred nor contempt for the new. As a matter of fact Miss Brent was a not infrequent visitor at the Red Cottage, and never seemed tired of hearing Susan talk of her nursling and sing the praises of the St. Denises.

"If I could have took the liberty, Jane," Susan had said to her discreet niece that very day, "if I could but have took the liberty, 'tisn't sending to Dragenham I need ha' bin for this brace. Miss Amelia, she'd have sent me the finest brace in the bag. But there—I don't dare to. People like ours who have had trouble are like to be proud."

The soup was excellent, and the turbot firm and white, while the lobster sauce could hardly be bettered. As he finished his fish, Sir Oswald looked up and met his son's eyes.

"Good to be home again, my lad," he said, smiling at him.

Hilary smiled back again.

"There's no place like England after all," he answered.

There was no regret, no bitterness in the frank, affectionate gaze of Hilary's eyes. After those first pangs, when he had realised that his inheritance had been lost over the green cloth of many European gaming-tables, he had not reproached his father. He was sure of one



thing, that that father had meant him no wrong. Fondest, most inseparable companions the father and son had been since Lady St. Denis had died while Hilary was yet a child. The dad had had hard luck; but he had never meant that Oriels should be lost to Hilary and Hilary's children.

"Better than Hanover," assented Hilary, looking round the room, with its few portraits and its low bookcases.

Lady St. Denis's picture was over the mantel-piece, one of the few things saved from Oriels, to make the Red Cottage homelike. She sat with slender hands laid together in the lap of her silk, long-waisted gown, old-fashioned with the ugly old-fashionedness of the day before yesterday. Her face was a clear oval, and the skin had the underlying brownness which she had bequeathed to her son. Her pensive lips, her brown curls and velvety eyes had their masculine counterpart in Hilary, if he had also his father's height and bearing, his father's quick smile and distinguished features.

"Not so good as Oriels," said Sir Oswald, with a quick, shy glance from under his eyelids at his son. "Not so good as Oriels, but better than most other places in the world. It has a home-like feeling; and Susan is a good cook. I think I shall end my days here, Hilary."

"You talk as though you were a fogey, dad,



instead of being still—the sunny side of any age, whatever it may be that you are."

Sir Oswald laughed.

"Thank you, my dear boy. I am forty-seven, as you know, Hilary, and I begin to feel old, too old to relish the idea of your going to India. You must wait a while, Hilary."

"I thought it was agreed between us, sir, before I went to Hanover, that it was the only thing possible."

"We were in a pessimistic frame of mind then, my lad, and we had not found our purchaser for Oriels. I was awfully cut up, I assure you, at having to tell you of my selfish folly."

"Don't let us talk about those old things," said Hilary, hastily. "It is all forgotten and forgiven—if indeed there could ever be any question of forgiveness between you and me."

They looked across the table at each other, a long look of trust and affection. Jane brought in the pheasants and set them before Sir Oswald. They were a delicious brown. The gravy was excellent, and the bread-sauce and browned bread crumbs had not been forgotten. There were potato balls and a young cauliflower as accessories.

Sir Oswald dismembered the birds like an artist. Sitting to such a dinner, he could not feel that all was lost, even though Oriels was in the hands of strangers.

"After all, what can a man wish for more than is here?" he asked cheerfully. "A little shelter like this, food cooked by the queen of plain cooks, which Susan undoubtedly is, a bottle of wine, a pipe, a book, and a cheerful fireside. I think I shall give up the town, boy, and settle here."

"You would make Susan perfectly happy if you did," said Hilary, with one of his sweet smiles. He was glad to have his father in this mood, and was pleased with the knowledge that their re-union was a happiness to him. He had seen Sir Oswald often enough when Black Care rode him; and he would be glad those days were gone for ever.

"Hang it all, boy, I can't part with you," Sir Oswald went on. "My only son. I never knew how lonely it was without you, Hil, till this time. I am as happy as a schoolboy at our being together again. A schoolboy! No; boys know nothing of such happiness."

"What would you have me do?"

"Stay in England—for a time at all events. Give up your idea of a regiment that is going out at once. I can count on seven hundred a year. I shall allow you a couple of hundred. With your pay it ought to suffice."

"You forget, sir."

"Ah! Searle's little girl; the moss-rosebud. She is a child. You are only twenty-two, my lad. You can both wait a bit."



"We should have to wait a bit in any case."

"Wait in England, then. Who knows what may turn up?"

"Are you in earnest about settling down here?"

"I think I could do very well. I used to be too proud-stomached for it; thought I never could endure to sit at the gate of Oriels in a little hole like this. I have changed my mind. I should have plenty of society here, and people are kindly disposed towards me. Egdon was delighted to see me when we met at the station —said that everyone would welcome me back. I shouldn't be dull, I think. Why should I be? I should have precisely the same society I had at Oriels."

The idea had taken possession of Sir Oswald, and was running away with him. Hilary watched him with a fond, amused air.

"You would really settle in this bandbox, dad? It isn't only because Susan has given us such a good dinner and you are at peace with the world?"

"Susan will give us a good dinner to-morrow, and as many to-morrows as we choose. No, indeed, Hil; I suppose I'm growing old. I get tired of wandering from town to town. There is scarcely an inn in Europe where I am not known. There is a time when one grows tired of finding one's best welcome at an inn."



He pushed back a lock of brown hair that had strayed across his forehead. The solitary diamond in his shirt-front sparkled in the light. The delicate, refined face did not look so very much older than his son's.

"I should keep a place for you, Hilary, whenever you had a few days' leave. Let us make a home of this, my boy."

"If I decide for India?"

"I shall probably wander again."

"It isn't a scheme that will all fade before morning, sir?"

"I am quite in earnest."

Hilary thought for a second of the many glittering kursaals, and the green cloth, and the croupier's rake ready to rake in the poor wreckage of Oriels. If his father would be content to stay at the Red Cottage there would be safety. And there was plenty there to amuse a man with Sir Oswald's taste for sport and outdoor life.

"I will stay, sir," he said. "There is no reason for my going on foreign service, for a time at all events—unless a war should break out."

"Ah, of course; then there would be no question of an exchange."

After dinner they sat over the fire and smoked and talked. It was a tempestuous night outside, which made the book-lined room



with its cheery glow seem snugger and more alluring.

Sir Oswald was eager as a boy over the future which had so suddenly been decided upon. A few hours ago Sir Oswald had not discovered how tired he was of wandering.

Once he caught Hilary looking towards the window panes, upon which the rain beat.

"No use to-night, my lad," he said, good-humouredly. "You would arrive like a drowned rat, and it would take all Mrs. Searle's politeness to welcome you amiably into her spotless drawing-room. Miss Peggy will wait till morning. She does not know you are here?"

"If she did I should have gone, no matter what the weather was."

"Ah, that is right, my lad. We will go the first thing after breakfast. By the way, I wonder what kind of bags they are making at Oriels this year. Susan says they have a couple of men down for the shooting."

There was a longing tone in Sir Oswald's voice which smote disagreeably on his son's ear.

"No matter what bags they are making! What is it to us?"

"Brent seemed a good sort—" said Sir Oswald in a hesitating way.

"You wouldn't shoot over Oriels if he were to ask you?" Hilary exclaimed, unbelievingly. "There are plenty of other places—Lord



Egdon's, or the Duke's, or Mr. Mountford's. I daresay Mrs. Giggs has a party at her place too. Any of them will take you on, without being forced to make one of the guns at Oriels."

"It is mediæval, my lad," began Sir Oswald.

"Never mind if it is," Hilary answered, stretching himself all his long length and frowning at his boots. "Of course you will do what you like, dad. I shouldn't care to shoot over Oriels—that is all."

Sir Oswald said nothing. Perhaps if the truth were told he had been asked, and had not refused.



CHAPTER XIII

OLD FRIENDS AND LOVERS

NEITHER Peggy nor Mr. Searle were in when Sir Oswald and his son called at the Rectory.

They were shown into the drawing-room, where Mrs. Searle and her sister sat talking, and stitching in a desultory way at some pieces of embroidery, to save them from the reproach of idleness in their own minds.

Mrs. Searle received the visitors with a consternation which Sir Oswald noticed and wondered at. Hilary was too much occupied in looking about the room, as though he missed something or somebody, to notice the shadow on the lady's face.

Sir Oswald wondered, and dismissed his first idea as an impossible one; for Mrs. Searle's face had smoothed almost immediately, and now looked pleasant enough. Yet there was some harassment in it which he did not remember there of old. He was a kindly man, and, though he had sometimes wondered in his own mind at his friend Searle's choice of a wife, he was concerned to see that worried



look, and the new haggardness which struck him sharply after a long absence.

They sat down and began to talk—at least, the elders did, for Hilary sat on, silent and abstracted. Mrs. Searle offered no information as to how long her husband's absence would be, no suggestion that Sir Oswald should await his return.

That, however, was hardly necessary from Sir Oswald's point of view. He had been used in the old days to come and go as he would at the Rectory, and the last thing that would have occurred to him would be that the loss of Oriels could make any difference with anybody.

Then Mrs. Grace was a pleasant and pretty woman still, and she was evidently pleased with the visitors. She grew quite animated as she talked to the tall, distinguished-looking man, so faultlessly dressed, so courtly in manner, who bent low when he talked to her and had an air of offering her homage, to which Minnie was the more sensitive after the years spent amid the plain society of her husband's friends, business men like himself and unversed in the ways that please women.

She was conscious of a vague envy of Sir Oswald's son. Why could not her Fred have had something of the young fellow's elegance? The old resentment against her husband for not having given Fred a public school and university education stirred in her heart.



Mrs. Searle meanwhile had begun talking to Hilary in the chilly bright way she assumed at times to cover her feelings. It was as like real brightness, real cheerfulness, as an imitation fire made of red glass and tinfoil is like the real thing.

"And so you have got through?" she asked. "And when do you join?"

"In about three weeks' time."

Mrs. Searle frowned ever so slightly. Were they going to be at the Red Cottage all that time? But the frown was quickly replaced by a smile which showed small white teeth almost as pretty and faultless as Peggy's own.

"And your regiment?"

"The Duke's Own. It is at Aldershot, at present."

"That will be pleasant; not too far from London. But of course, I forgot. It is under orders for India, is it not?"

"No; I have given up thinking of India for the present. We shall be here for some time—unless indeed war should break out. But there is no sign of that at present."

Mrs. Searle stared at him for an instant as though she doubted the evidence of her ears.

"You are not going to India?" she asked incredulously.

"No. My father has decided to stay on at the Red Cottage—unless he should grow tired

of it. He wants me to stay in the country, for a time at all events."

"But he will grow tired of it," said Mrs. Searle, eagerly. "You don't suppose anyone accustomed to his wandering life will settle down like that? The world-hunger will very soon be on him again."

She smiled sweetly, but her eyes were disturbed.

"You forget that he was quite a stay-at-home person at one time," Hilary replied, rather coldly.

"But boxed up in a little place like the Red Cottage! He would never endure it, after Oriels! You'll find he'll very soon grow tired of it."

Hilary turned, smiling, to his father.

"Mrs. Searle won't believe that you'll ever content yourself at the Red Cottage," he said.

"Ah, but she will find herself wrong," Sir Oswald answered, turning to her gaily. "You will see, Mrs. Searle. You won't get rid of me in a hurry. I told Susan this morning that I was going to live at the Red Cottage. I left her in tears of joy, the kind creature. Can you tell me, Mrs. Grace, why people like this kind housekeeper of mine always weep their satisfaction?"

Hilary looked at his father with quiet amusement. He was making himself as agreeable as possible to that handsome, grey-haired Mrs.



Grace, who looked, Hilary thought, as Mrs. Searle might have looked in more fortunate circumstances. Yet—with a husband like the Rector, and a daughter like Peggy, Mrs. Searle's lot might have been happy enough, even if means were straitened.

He listened a little longer to Mrs. Searle's conversation. She gave him the news of the neighbourhood. Not that there was much to tell. Things were just the same, no one married, no one dead. Lady Egdon was to give a great ball at Christmas, and the girls all over the county were in great excitement, since dancing men were being beaten up from near and far—far usually. Hilary would remember what a dearth of men there was in the county. Then there was some talk about Lady Margaret Pierpont being married. A Mr. Sackville had been staying there—immensely wealthy, as old as the Duke. And the Duchess had been very civil, driving him all over the county. Lady Margaret did not look exactly happy. Still, she had led a dull life, poor girl!

Mrs. Searle broke off with a slightly artificial little laugh. What would the Rector say to her gossiping like this? She had been going on to say something of the new inhabitants of Oriels, but had a second thought. Probably it would not be pleasant to Hilary to talk about them.

Presently the young man's impatience found expression in speech.

"Which way did Peggy go, Mrs. Searle?" he asked, standing up and walking a step or two as though the narrow space cramped him.

Again the odd look of apprehension came into Mrs. Searle's light eyes.

"I can hardly say," she replied. "Peggy did not say which way she was going."

"She will be in for lunch?"

"I should think so, unless she should lose count of time and be late."

"I might walk a little way to meet her perhaps, if I knew which way she would come."

"She is not alone," said Mrs. Searle hastily.

Hilary frowned magnificently, like a young god.

"That can't matter," he said, "she will want to see me."

Before his masculine assertiveness Mrs. Searle collapsed.

"Of course she will be glad to see her old friend—" she began, and then broke off hastily. "I hear my husband, You will excuse me for a moment, Hilary."

She was in the hall while Mr. Searle was hanging up his great-coat.

"Sir Oswald and Hilary are here, Cuthbert," she said.

"Sir Oswald and Hilary! Bravo! I never



thought of anything so delightful. Where are they? In the drawing-room? They will stay for lunch, of course."

He was transferring his red bandanna handkerchief rapidly as he spoke from his overcoat to his other pocket, and he did not see the worried look on his wife's face. His own was beaming.

"That is just it, Cuthbert. I haven't asked them to lunch. There is only cold meat, and——"

Mrs. Searle remembered how once before she had not asked Hilary to lunch because of the cold mutton, and how Peggy had swept aside all her housewifely excuses.

"Bless my soul!" said the Rector, irritably. "Do you think St. Denis can't eat cold meat? What nonsense you women do get into your heads. Do your best with the lunch, my dear. I know you can accomplish miracles of housekeeping."

He turned with the smile on his face and went into the drawing-room, almost shouting his welcome as he opened the door and came face to face with his friend. There was a sudden Babel of talk and laughter. Then Mrs. Searle turned away with a sick look and went down to the kitchen regions.

"I am going to meet Peggy," announced Hilary, who had been standing with his hand

on the arm of a chair, after the first exchange of greetings was over.

"Do, my lad," said Mr. Searle. "Go up through the village. I saw her take that way, herself and her cousin, a couple of hours ago. She will be nearly home now."

Hilary hardly waited to go quietly, like the grown-up Hilary he was. He could have flung his cap up as he rushed from the house, racing down the garden-path as he had done many a time, before he had any dignity to keep up. He could have burst out into shouting and singing as he went because he was going to see Peggy—his little Peggy—his dear old playmate again.

Unseen herself, Mrs. Searle watched him through the barred window of her pantry.

"If only they had delayed their coming three days," she muttered to herself. "Three days. Then Fred would have gone, and things could have been left to go their own way. But now—"

While she skilfully disguised the cold mutton and made a savoury of eggs for the luncheon—Mrs. Searle had to be her own cook on occasion—she wondered how Hilary and Peggy would meet. She would know soon enough. That spoilt child, Fred, was no adept at concealing his feelings. If only the St. Denises had waited those three days till the Graces were safely back at Streatham Hill!



As a matter of fact Hilary had met Peggy, seeing that she was not alone, with the reticence which distinguishes the gentle lover from the simple. He had moderated his steps on reaching the village, and had not disappointed a single one of the old goodies or comely matrons or blooming damsels who came to their doorsteps to welcome Master Hilary home again. There might be a new master at Oriels, but the old squire had not abated a jot of his dignity with these good folk, and no son of a reigning house could have been received with more enthusiasm than was Hilary by the people of Wivenham village.

It was not in Hilary, as it might have been in a less complaisant young man, to hasten away from all that good-will. So it was that Peggy and Fred had topped the hill and were coming down the village street before Hilary had reached the Blue Pig, whose signpost hung just midway of the village.

Peggy gave a little cry of pleasure when Hilary came to meet her with a glowing face. She let her hand rest in his an instant while she recalled the young men to each other. But there was very little even for Fred's jealous eyes to spy out in the manner of their greeting. They met as two affectionate old friends, and if Peggy's roses were suddenly increased it was a way that Peggy had. The least little happy event was enough to awaken all her blushes.

Fred was more silent than usual at the luncheon-table, but Mrs. Searle was relieved not to find in his face the glower of anger which she had dreaded.

The fact was that such company as that of Sir Oswald and his son depressed Fred. He might bluster to himself that he was as good as they were, or a good deal better, since every one knew that they were ruined and that the father had gambled away his son's heritage. He might assure his red cheeks and sprouting moustache in the looking-glass that that fellow, St. Denis, had muffish ways, and that girls, especially spirited girls like Peggy, would infinitely prefer a more manly chap. These were only so many sops that Fred offered his vanity; and hidden away somewhere, unacknowledged, Fred knew himself for much coarser clay than Hilary St. Denis, and raged at the knowledge.

The next three days were days of torture to poor Mrs. Searle, for daily the little cloud grew blacker on Fred's brow.

The St. Denises were always popping in at all hours to the Rectory. They came and went as they had been accustomed to; and Hilary monopolised Peggy as by immemorial right. He would snatch her right away from the others out to the garden, where they would stroll up and down by the pond in that sheltered



walk where in old times, when Hilary was Mr. Searle's pupil, he had inducted Peggy into the violent delights of cigarette smoking.

Fred found them there one day, and, unseen himself, caught sight of Peggy in dainty enjoyment of a cigarette. It made Fred furious—not because he objected to the smoking, he was too much a man of the world for that—but because it had never been done in his company. He had an intuition of the extent of the intimacy Peggy's smoking connoted. He turned on his heel before they had seen him, and pushed his way across the little bridge, where the bulrushes grew tall as spears on either side and almost hid the footway.

Perhaps he would have been angrier still if it had not been for Peggy's conciliatory manner towards him. Peggy did not dare to try to include him in her moments with Hilary, as Mrs. Searle had tried to do and failed ignominously.

But let Hilary be out of the way and Peggy would do all Fred desired—walk with him, play billiards with him, read to him, sing to him, anything. So, between-whiles, she laid little cool lotions of healing to his hurt vanity.

Luckily, it was only three days, thought Mrs. Searle, somewhat impatient of Mrs. Grace's admiration for the St. Denises. In her pleasure at Sir Oswald's politeness the mother seemed

to overlook the fact that Fred was often out of it. But Fred was the one to be reckoned with. A little attention from Sir Oswald had made Mr. Grace as pleased as Minnie. So the elders were disposed of.

If only now Fred's patience or obtuseness or egregious vanity—Mrs. Searle could use hard epithets about her nephew in the secrecy of her own heart—would hold out, all would be well.

As for Peggy, poor little Peggy, Mrs. Searle was constrained to admit that her young daughter had grown wonderfully amenable. Her silent anger, pretty widely distributed these days, did not include Peggy.



CHAPTER XIV

THE MOTHER

MRS. SEARLE'S uneasy compassion for her child was not lessened by an interview which Fred forced upon her the day before that third day to which she had been looking forward as thirsty travellers to water-springs.

She was in her own bedroom, huddled into a warm grey shawl which had been Minnie's gift at the beginning of the winter. It was that coldest, greyest hour of the early winter day before dark has fallen, and Mrs. Searle, with chilly fingers, was making up her accounts in a book which she kept in a locked box in her wardrobe.

She had thought herself alone for the afternoon. The whole party had been invited to lunch with Sir Oswald at his cottage; and a couple of hours ago they had set out, Fred in better temper than usual, because Peggy had been kind; Minnie in a pleased flutter, which caused her sister a certain irritated satisfaction.

Suddenly there was a sharp knock at the door, and a voice: "May I come in, Aunt Alice? It is I, Fred."

Mrs. Searle, with an exclamation, stood up and replaced the account-book in its box, locked the box, and put it back in the wardrobe, before opening the door to her nephew.

"Come in, Fred," she said, with an appearance of cordiality. Her heart had really gone down to her boots at the presage of calamity afforded by this unexpected return. "You are back early, my dear boy. I did not hear you return."

"I have come back by myself," he said moodily.

Mrs. Searle knew perfectly well that he had. Yet her eyes and hands went up in surprise.

"But why did you come back?" she asked. "Weren't you enjoying yourself?"

If she had followed the impulse of the natural woman she would have taken and shaken Fred, and given him some very plain speaking about learning not to be a cub and various other hard things.

However, Mrs. Searle seldom followed her impulses, so she smiled sweetly as she asked the question.

"I wasn't enjoying myself," he answered sulkily. "I want a talk with you, Aunt Alice. But why are you sitting here in the cold? Can't you have a fire?"

He looked disparagingly and compassionately from his aunt's pinched face to the carpetless



floor, the bare walls and the poor furniture. Everything spoke of straitened means.

"You ought to be more comfortable here," he said. "The room you gave me is comfortable enough. Do you keep all the bareness for yourself?"

"This is not Streatham Hill," answered Mrs. Searle, with a chilly laugh. "You forget, my dear Fred, that we are not well off."

"You ought to be comfortable," he said, doggedly. "My mother steps on Turkey carpets inches deep. You ought to be more comfortable, Aunt Alice."

"Please say no more, Fred. My husband would not like it, And Minnie is very good to me," Mrs. Searle went on, in a flutter. "You came back—"

"Because I was out of it. Tell me, Aunt Alice, what is there between Peggy and that fellow, St. Denis?"

"My dear Fred,"—Mrs. Searle went red and pale,—"what should there be, except boy and girl friendship? They were reared together, you know."

"It seems to me an uncommonly close friendship," Fred went on. "There isn't room in it for me, I can see plainly."

He drummed on the table beside him with his fingers and looked out of the window. He could see through the now leafless trees a long

stretch of the road that led to the Red Cottage. There was no sign of the remainder of the party following him. Probably they would not for hours yet. They had seemed pretty well settled down for the afternoon when he had left them, enjoying themselves too thoroughly for more than a passing protest when he declared that he must return to the Rectory to write letters for the post.

His aunt stood beside him, the shawl drawn more closely about her narrow shoulders, hardly knowing what to say. Then she had an inspiration.

"There was room for you last night when Peggy was singing for you."

"St. Denis was not there then," he reminded her.

"Hilary is thoughtless. He is always so exacting with poor Peggy. I am sure when she was a little child he made her always do what he wanted, never what she wanted herself, poor little thing."

"The selfish brute!" cried Fred, with righteous indignation. "He carried her off to-day as usual. They talk about things I know nothing of, even when I am there. I might be hundreds of miles away. Although, to do her justice, Peggy will try to explain things to me."

"They were so much together, you see, Fred."

"Aye; years in which I had no part," replied



Fred, with an understanding his aunt had not given him credit for. "I don't like those boy and girl friendships, when they remain so close. Tell me, Aunt Alice,"—poor Mrs. Searle turned hot and cold—"I mean to be answered, you know. Is Peggy engaged to St. Denis?"

"My dear Fred, what an idea!" faltered Mrs. Searle.

"Is she, Aunt Alice?"

Fred's hand had gripped her arm now, and Fred's little pig eyes—as she called them to herself afterwards in an excess of reminiscent indignation—looked straight into hers. She nerved herself to meet them.

"She is not, Fred," she answered steadily.

He dropped her hand and looked away.

"Ah, well, that being so, I have as good a chance as another man," he said. "Do you think I ought to speak now, Aunt Alice?"

Mrs. Searle looked on the ground.

"I would not—just yet," she answered, as though she had been thinking the matter out.

"Why not?"

"My dear Fred, if you ask my advice, you ought to be content to take it without too many questions. I am Peggy's mother, and I may be supposed to know more about girls than you. And—and—"

"You think Peggy is not ready?"

"She is very young."

"Twenty. My mother was married at eighteen. The pater approves of early marriages. Do you know that if I marry to his liking he will give me five thousand a year and a partnership?"

"So much?" Mrs. Searle looked greedy. "Your mother has not——"

She paused, not knowing how far Fred might object to his affairs being made a subject of conversation between her sister and herself.

Fred finished the sentence for her.

"My mother has no idea of it. We don't tell all our affairs to women. The pater told me. If I marry to please him. I daresay he will think I might have done better. The Wigginses now—or the Apperleys of the Towers. You know Apperley's Blacking, Aunt Alice? Mother Apperley was always glad when I called. Perhaps too glad. It rather put me off. Still, Peggy is Peggy; and the pater doesn't mind doing a handsome thing once in a while."

At that moment Mrs. Searle felt as though she loathed her nephew. However, her face kept its somewhat mechanical smile. She forced herself to answer him as he would be answered, bitter against herself the while.

"I quite understand that you could do very much better from a money point of view. Still, as you say, Peggy is Peggy."

"Aye; and I don't know any one like her," said Fred, waxing lover-like. "I couldn't be



as fond of any other girl. The pater would like to see me married. He thinks I am a bit inclined to go the pace. Well, supposing I let Peggy alone till she comes to us after Christmas?"

"Supposing you let her alone till then, Fred. It would be very wise."

"You really think so, Aunt Alice?"

"I am sure of it."

"And she doesn't care a straw about St. Denis?"

"Beyond mere friendly liking."

"And she is well disposed towards me?"

"Haven't I told you so many times?"

"Aye, you have," said Fred. "If you hadn't I'd have been inclined to step out and leave the field to St. Denis."

"Oh, I hope you won't do that. The St. Denises have nothing. Nothing! Besides, Peggy doesn't care for Hilary. She——"

Mrs. Searle wanted to say that Peggy preferred Fred, but somehow she could not do it, though she might have trusted to Fred's vanity to swallow it.

"I noticed that she was wearing a ring, an old-fashioned thing. I would give her the best money could buy in Bond Street."

"Poor child! She has only a few old-fashioned trinkets," murmured Mrs. Searle, hoping devoutly that Fred would ask her no more questions about the ring.

"I don't care how old-fashioned they are, Fred said unconsciously, "so long as I can give her better."

"And you will, my dear boy, you will," answered Mrs. Searle.

Since she had heard of the five thousand a year and the partnership, she could look at Fred more tolerantly. It would be very nice for a young couple, with the prospect of succession to ten times five thousand. What safety, what freedom from harassing anxieties it would mean to her girl!

And still—she had not been Cuthbert Searle's wife all those years without learning fastidiousness. If only she might have taken Hilary St. Denis to her arms as her son-in-law! If only she could have rejoiced over Peggy's marriage with one who was so much more her natural mate! But since it must be Fred, they must make the best of him.

"Be amiable with Peggy," she said, as she dismissed him to his real or imaginary letter-writing. "No girl is won by sour looks."

"I will," answered Fred, looking back at her cheerfully. The talk had restored his confidence in himself. "I'm much obliged to you, Aunt Alice, for your encouragement. If Peggy marries me"—he came back into the room to say it—"I'll take care of you. Hang it all, the mater doesn't do her duty."



When Peggy was changing her dress for dinner, Mrs. Searle came into her room. For the last evening of her sister's visit she had put on her only dinner dress—a grey silk, with a little good yellowed old lace about the square opening at the neck and at the wrists.

"You are growing thin, little mother," said Peggy, seeing her mother's reflection in the glass behind her own milky young shoulders. She was clasping an old-fashioned garnet collar about her neck as she spoke.

"What are you going to wear, dear?" asked Mrs. Searle, coming round and facing her.

Peggy pointed silently to a blue silk blouse which lay upon a chair.

"Wear your white frock to-night," her mother said.

"My white! Why, I am keeping that for Lady Egdon's ball!"

"Your Aunt Minnie has not seen you wear her pretty gift once. Wear it to-night, dear."

"If I should get it spoilt!"

"I want you to wear it, Peggy."

Peggy turned away and made a little mouth of rebellion to herself. Nevertheless she put back her blue blouse and the black skirt she had intended to wear with it into their places in the wardrobe, and took from a drawer very slowly the white China silk which Mrs. Grace had given her a year ago. It was thick

creamy white, very becoming, and it was trimmed softly and amply with deep frills of chiffon.

"I shall be too fine," she murmured, as she put on the skirt.

"My dear Peggy!"

For a moment the mother's voice and eyes were full of maternal passion. It was not often that Mrs. Searle expressed herself so openly.

"Dearest mother!"

Peggy turned and smiled at her.

"You know I would give you everything I could, the whole world if I could, to make you happy, child. For you or your father I would do anything, Peggy."

"Why, we know it," said Peggy, ethereal now in the white gown. "Haven't you always slaved for us? I wish you would let me take more of the burden from your shoulders now. You keep the heavy work yourself and give me the light."

"I won't have your complexion and your eyes spoilt over a kitchen fire. And I won't have your hands reddened and hardened. I want you to remain my pretty Peggy, not careworn, not tired like—— Never mind," she broke off with a laugh. "Peggy, I want you to be very nice to Fred to-night."

"Why, of course I shall be. Haven't I been?"

"You have been my dear, good girl. But, Peggy, if he should by any chance ask you, I want you not to tell him that you are—that there is any foolish tie between you and Hilary."

"I shouldn't think of telling him," answered Peggy, a little coldly.

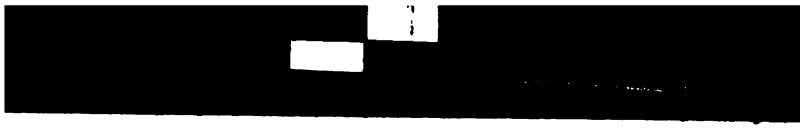
"He might ask about your ring. I know he has noticed it. Peggy, I don't ask you this thing lightly."

"If it will please you, mother dear, I can leave off the ring," said Peggy, slipping it from her finger.

To her own amazement she slipped off Hilary's ring with a certain feeling of pleasure to herself, as though somehow she eased herself of a fetter. She did not stop to analyse the feeling, nor how it was that she did not resent her mother's effusive gratitude.

Peggy looked lovely that night, riveting Fred's chains tighter than before. He noticed the absence of the ring, too, and put it down to her desire to let him know that she was free. Doubtless her mother had told her of their interview, and she had taken it off in consequence.

Fred went away next day in the best of good humour, and with an almost tender effusiveness in his manner towards his cousin which was as much as poor Peggy could bear.



"My sweet Peggy!" thought Mrs. Searle, when the danger was well over and she could breathe freely for some weeks to come. "My dear Peggy! If only I could have helped her where her heart was concerned!"

About the same time Peggy, resuming her ring, was wondering whether her heart was very deeply concerned in the engagement with Hilary after all, wondering with some misgiving.



CHAPTER XV

TEMPTATION

Sir Oswald St. Denis was alone a good deal these days, since Hilary had to run up to town many times preparatory to joining his regiment.

During the first day or two of Hilary's absence Sir Oswald had listened somewhat enviously to the sound of the guns over in the plantations of Oriels. The popping that went on all day brought a cloud to his brow which made him moody, and troubled Susan Sweet a good deal. Mr. Searle was not available either since the bishop was holding a visitation. Sir Oswald had not yet made his presence generally known, or doubtless he would have been asked to make one of half-a-dozen shooting parties. As it was, he sat in the Red Cottage, like the Peri outside the gates of Paradise, and listened resentfully to the sound of the guns.

He had down his gun-case, and spent a morning cleaning and oiling the guns. He whistled to himself over the job as he did it; and Susan, listening in the kitchen, had her heart momentarily lifted up, but when they had been replaced in their case Sir Oswald once more

had nothing to think upon but his grievance against the world.

Hilary was to be away for a week this time.

"The young dog," growled his father; "he finds this place too slow; and he is jolly well right. Why didn't I go up with him? I think I'll do it to-morrow; and perhaps run across to Homburg. I'm feeling confoundedly gouty these days, and I believe, in spite of Susan's big fires, that the Red Cottage is damp."

Another time he girded at Hilary for a bad lover.

"When I was his age, and his mother was pretty Peggy's, would the town have kept me from her? Hang it all, the boy's confoundedly cold-blooded, not like a son of mine at all! And the little girl doesn't seem to miss him either. More cheerful by far since those strange relations cleared out. Well, well; the world has changed since my day!"

It was when Sir Oswald's spirits were at the lowest that temptation assailed him. He was stretching his toes moodily in front of the fire one grey, dry afternoon, when who should come in but Tom Brent, looking brown and wholesome and, Sir Oswald could not help acknowledging, thoroughly sportsmanlike.

"I had no idea you were back," Tom Brent said, heartily, "or I'd have called before."

"Only came on Tuesday. The boy was



with me till the day before yesterday. He has run up to town for a week."

"And you are alone?"

"Except for the blue devils," answered Sir Oswald, with a melancholy laugh.

Tom looked at him with a diffidence that became him.

"Would you join us?" he began, hesitatingly. "There are a couple of men staying with us, Pontifex of the F.O. and Harvey Lascelles, whom I knew at Washington, for the shooting. I needn't praise the shooting to you, sir."

He broke off with an embarassed laugh.

"My dear fellow," said Sir Oswald, "don't apologise. I should like to come of all things. I was getting pretty well tired of my own company, and that of the blue devils aforesaid."

"Come back with me," said Tom Brent, cordially. "I can send over for your things before dinner time. My sister will be delighted to see you,"

"Why aren't you out this afternoon?"

"My sister heard from Mrs. Giggs that you were here, and I thought I would look you up."

"Ah, that was handsome of you! I haven't been out to-day, and I feel quite house-bound. Been trying to amuse myself with a stupid novel all the morning."

He kicked with his foot contemptuously at the companion of his solitude, which lay on the floor.

"Not been out!" repeated Tom Brent. "No wonder you found it dull. The first frost of the year is on the leaves. It is a delightful day for a walk or a canter."

"I've no stables at the Red Cottage."

Tom was on the point of saying that there were half-a-dozen mounts in the Oriels stables, but some delicacy restrained him. Later, when Sir Oswald was more accustomed to being a guest in his old home, it would be time enough to offer him a mount.

Sir Oswald noticed the impulse and withdrawal.

"Hang it all!" he said to himself, "if he is a new man, he is a gentleman. Oriels might have done worse!"

It gave him almost a shock later to find how faithfully Oriels had been kept. Briggs met him on the threshold as though he received the King. Mrs. Tubbs stole from the upper regions to get a glimpse of him, and, being caught ere she could escape, had a hand-shake and retired with her black silk apron to her eyes. Half-a-dozen friendly faces he knew peered at him from the gallery on his way to the drawing-room. Everything was as he remembered it. He was really grateful to these considerate people who had spared him the shocks he had braced himself to endure coming back to Oriels.

In the drawing-room he found a party of



ladies: Amelia, presiding over the tea-table in a wonderful Paris tea-gown with fly-away sleeves that gave her an oddly angelic appearance; Mrs. Giggs, brilliant as an autumn leaf in a scarlet frock and furs; Miss Lascelles, a tall, fair girl, as long in her lower limbs as a Reynolds lady, and trailing her long skirts as gracefully. The men were still out shooting; but a spirit lamp hissed under the urn, and a hot-water dish kept the toast warm against their return.

It struck Sir Oswald pleasantly that he had hardly ever before seen three as pretty women together. He liked to bask in women's smiles, if he was the most faithful of lovers to his dead wife.

Amelia received him with delightful empressement, or with something more refined than empressement would have been in the circumstances. It was very much better than sitting alone with a dull novel in the cramped little room at the Red Cottage, to stand on the hearth-rug at Oriels with his tea-cup in his hand, looking down at three pairs of bright eyes lifted to his, full of friendliness and desire to please and be pleased.

Sir Oswald had forgiven Mrs. Giggs for wanting to marry him. In fact, he liked the little woman very much. Who could help liking a little red-brown woman who was as bright as a squirrel?

She had not resented his coldness to her, not a bit. He could not but remember that she had been very good to him and to his boy. Indeed, her goodness to Hilary had known no lapse; and Sir Oswald had an idea that little Mrs. Giggs represented to his motherless boy as close an approximation to a mother as he could know on earth.

As for her liking for himself, well, he was the kind of man to feel tenderness rather than the reverse for a woman who was fond of him, even though he could not face the idea of putting another woman in Claire's place.

Mrs. Giggs was staying at Oriels, he found. She had let her shooting, not feeling equal, she said, to the task of entertaining a party of people. Then, when the other men came in, and she got the baronet's ear to herself, she was off in talk about Hilary, a subject of which his father was not likely to grow tired.

"You spoil the lad," Sir Oswald grumbled, with pretended ill-humour. "He was longing to get off to you as soon as he arrived. Indeed, only one visit intervened."

"Of course. I was not jealous of the Rectory."

Sir Oswald, as he received the battery of those red-brown eyes, had an idea that some girls might be jealous of Mrs. Giggs. She was an uncommonly pretty woman, and in those



dangerous thirties. Girls, even as pretty as Peggy or Miss Lascelles, had not acquired the art of pleasing, in which a woman like Mrs. Giggs becomes pre-eminent.

Presently they found themselves in a little isolation, as though people understood they were old friends, and would have plenty to say after an absence. Amelia looked on at them with a pleased air from a distance. She was delighting rosy-cheeked, little Mr. Pontifex, of the eyeglass and the superhuman impudence, by her fresh New World view of everything.

"You are irresistible," he said. "You have come out of a Florentine picture-gallery, yet your opinions on men and manners are frightfully worldly, and dated the day after to-morrow."

"Now you are mistaken!" said Amelia, with a peacock's feather fan by her fair hair. "I'm deadly romantic, and I ought to have been born three hundred years ago."

"I'm very glad you weren't. Do go on smiling like that at me, Miss Brent," he implored.

"There is no pleasing you," Amelia replied. "I laughed like anything at you the other day and you were downright mad."

"Ah, that was when I was serious," said the little man, lugubriously. "Do you always take your proposals like that?"

"I can't seem to take them seriously somehow," said Amelia, pensively.

Meanwhile Sir Oswald and Mrs. Giggs were apparently well satisfied with each other. The little woman provoked confidences, and Sir Oswald was telling her how miserable he had been feeling before Tom Brent's arrival.

"You never remembered," she said, with a soft sigh, "how very glad others of your old friends would have been to see you."

"Upon my honour, you're right. I ought to have called, Mrs. Giggs, especially since you've been so good to my boy. Of course, not altogether for that. He didn't tell me, by the way, that you were going to be here."

"I didn't tell him. You know his prejudices. I should have been back at Acres before he returned from town."

Mrs. Giggs' candid eyes revealed nothing of the fact that she had accepted Amelia's invitation chiefly because of the fact that Acres was eight good miles from the Red Cottage, somewhat of a walk even for Hilary's long legs.

"Ah, you know his feelings about this place." Sir Oswald lowered his voice, and Mrs. Giggs' eyes drooped. She was enjoying the appearance of intimacy which she felt they must present to the onlookers.

"I don't know how he'll take my being here. Youth is intolerant, you know. And yet,"—Sir Oswald hardly knew where his con-

fidence was leading him—"and yet it was a toss-up, I assure you, between this and Homburg. In another hour I believe I'd have packed my bag and been off."

"Ah, I'm glad Mr. Brent was in time."

"The Red Cottage is a jolly little crib of a place. I assure you it seemed no end of homelike, so long as I had the boy's face opposite to me. But when I was alone it was quite another matter. Do you know how the sins and follies of all your lifetime,—but, of course, you don't; you have no sins and follies to your charge."

"Ah, Sir Oswald, women are not exempt."

"My dear child, I have known one woman perfectly exempt, and why not others?"

Mrs. Giggs liked to be called "My dear child" by Sir Oswald, but she liked less the trend of his reminiscences; although, to do her justice, his faithfulness to his wife's memory was one of the things out of which she built up an ideal Sir Oswald, despite many weaknesses and faults.

"I wasn't meant to be alone," he went on, with a sigh.

"And so, you are afraid Hilary will think you ought to be bound by his prejudices?" Mrs. Giggs said hastily.

"He'd almost rather see me at the——I beg your pardon, Mrs. Giggs—at——Homburg,

shall we say? — than know me here this minute."

"Even talking to me?"

"Even talking to you."

"Little Peggy is almost as bad. Miss Brent has taken a fancy to her and tried to make friends, but Peggy stands off. A mistaken idea of loyalty, I suppose."

"Seeing that I don't keep up a grievance, I don't see why they should," grumbled Sir Oswald.

"We must try to reason them out of it."

"You can do it with Hilary if anyone can. You have all his confidence," said the father, eagerly.

"I will do my best. I don't see how he is to be at the Red Cottage as often as he will be now he has decided against India, and go on ignoring the friendliness of Oriels."

"I don't see it either."

"Miss Brent might persuade him, if he were not, of course, absorbed in Peggy."

Mrs. Giggs shot the shyest, brightest look from under her curling lashes at Sir Oswald.

"Absorbed in Peggy, is he? I suppose he is. Yet she isn't the only woman in the world. You have great influence over him yourself, Mrs. Giggs."

"It will be always exercised for his good, dear boy," said the widow, looking down at her lap.

Yes, it was distinctly good to be at Oriels, its late master thought. Every preference, every whim of his seemed to be remembered by the servants, and someone had surely passed on the knowledge to the mistress of the house, for the dinner had his favourite dishes, everything was as he liked it. He might have been master again, so quickly were his wishes and wants anticipated.

He had been a wanderer too long. This was better than pensions and kursaals crowded with shady people who had the best reasons possible for staying out of their country. It was something of a delightful surprise to be with English ladies again. Now, little Mrs. Giggs: he had hardly thought her so pretty in her ways in the old days.

Sir Oswald made a more than usually careful toilette that evening, rejecting half-a-dozen ties before he made a quite satisfactory bow.

"A man grows a sloven in solitude," he said. "I am glad I allowed myself to be tempted."

CHAPTER XVI

VICTORY

SIR OSWALD returned to the Red Cottage an hour before Hilary was due there, five days later. He wanted to tell the lad himself how much he had been enjoying himself at Oriels, and how uncommonly pleasant everything had been. Somehow, though he wouldn't have acknowledged it for worlds, he shrank from anyone else anticipating him with the news, and hoped that Hilary wouldn't meet anybody on the way down or at the station who would mention having met him at Oriels. That was a likely thing enough to happen, since Miss Brent and her brother had become very popular, and lunches and teas at Oriels were quite an institution.

It was pleasant to Hilary, coming in after a cold journey of five hours, to find his father, with that beaming smile of welcome, standing on the hearth-rug before a fire of wood and coal delightfully warming and fragrant.

Their hands met in a cordial grasp.

"Well, dad," said the son.

"Well, boy," echoed the father.

"I'll just have time to dress," said Hilary, consulting his watch.

"Plenty of time for a bath, my lad. I told Susan to keep back the dinner half-an-hour."

When Hilary came down presently, refreshed by his bath and change, he found his father turning over the pages of the "Field." Sir Oswald had not been reading, but listening to the sounds upstairs—where the toilet operations of his young giant had seemed to shake the small house.

"I feel much better now," said Hilary, coming in.

"Ready for dinner?"

"Quite. I hope there is a good one. It's good to come back to this hungry air."

"Trust Susan for that. How is London?"

"Wrapped up in a dirty fog. All gas below, sooty midnight above. The railway station was a ghostly place—everybody walking about like spectres in the fog."

Sir Oswald coughed as though he felt it in his throat.

"Wonderful what keeps people there," he said.

"Love of company, I suppose. I saw a theatre every night. I used to think of you, sitting here alone, and wish you were with me."

Sir Oswald coughed again.

"And why should I be sitting here alone?" he asked, with an attempt at lightness.

Something in his voice made Hilary look at him wonderingly.

"Why, indeed, dad?" he answered. "I suppose you went a good deal to the Rectory and to other old friends."

"Searle has been busy with church matters. I haven't seen him."

Sir Oswald had a cowardly thought of keeping his revelation to himself till dinner was over; but then he felt that he would enjoy his dinner better with that behind him.

"The fact is, my lad," he went on, in a great hurry, "I haven't been here. The very day after you went I was confoundedly lonely and miserable, not knowing what to do with myself, and much inclined to cut it all and run over to the Continent, when who should come in but Brent?"

"Of Oriels?" said Hilary, with a dark misgiving of what was to come.

"Of Oriels," Sir Oswald repeated, wincing. "He found me sitting here in the doldrums, and carried me off—wouldn't listen to a word. A most cordial fellow. The fact is I've been at Oriels all the week. Only got back an hour ago. They were very unwilling to let me leave. As a matter of fact——"

As a matter of fact Sir Oswald had given a



weak promise to Amelia for himself and his son that they would join the Oriels house-party as soon as possible. However, he caught a sight of his son's frown, and checked himself on the verge of that confession.

"It was most agreeable," he went on. "Your little friend, Mrs. Giggs, was there. There were a couple of Foreign Office men, and a very pretty girl, sister to one of them—Miss Lascelles. And there was no end of people dropping in. The Duke of Wells has taken a sort of permanent place on the drawing-room hearth-rug of afternoons. Her Grace doesn't seem so friendly. But then Miss Brent doesn't mind that. Upon my word, she's a wonderful girl. What do you think of her capturing the heart of the Duchess of St. Edmunds? She began it by doing something for Searle's friend, the priest's little chapel in Dragenham, carpeted it all over, or something of that sort. The Duchess of Wells can't forgive her; but Miss Amelia doesn't mind. She likes the other Duchess best, has been to see her; and her Grace promises to come over to Oriels in her little wheeled chair—as soon as Spring comes. And the two Dukes have met together in the drawing-room of Oriels. You should have seen Miss Amelia. Radiant about it! But not over-radiant! Upon my word, she has conquered this most exclusive of counties."

Sir Oswald was talking against time, not looking at his son. Father and son stood close together, Sir Oswald with his back to the fire, facing the room, his son looking at his own reflection in the glass over the fire-place with stormy young eyes.

"Was Peggy at Oriels too?" he asked, when his father paused for breath.

"Peggy? Peggy Searle? No; she wasn't there. I remember Miss Brent saying she had asked her; she seemed disappointed at not having her."

"So there is one person who refuses to be dragged at the Brent chariot-wheels," said Hilary, in a tone which, taken with the speech, was a conclusive proof of his youth.

Sir Oswald smiled under his depressed air.

"My dear lad," he pleaded, "be reasonable; take a sensible view of it. How have the Brents injured us?"

"Oh, not at all. I have no enmity towards them. They have, on the contrary, benefited us, as those things are understood nowadays. Only I don't want to see Oriels in their hands."

"You make me feel very sorry and ashamed of myself," said Sir Oswald, in a humble manner. "I shall feel like that all my life, Hilary."

"I did not mean to reproach you, sir."

"But I must reproach myself. What I wanted to say, Hil, was that Oriels could



not be in better hands. Even if I—had kept straight—we were hopelessly crippled, keeping it up. We couldn't have gone on with it. It was bound to come, boy. I wanted to see the old place again—to see how it looked. Do you never want to see it?"

"Always," answered the young fellow, with something like a groan. "I have caught sight of a bit of it at times between the trees. It made me feel famished."

Sir Oswald looked at his son with honest consternation.

"I didn't think it had gone so deep as that, Hil," he said, hanging his head for a minute. "Do you know I felt something of the same sort of desire for the old place till I went? Then, seeing it so well looked after and all that made me feel more satisfied—more content. I wish you would try it, Hil, lad."

"I don't think the prescription would answer in my case," answered Hilary.

The amicable feeling between the two was not apparently disturbed after this interview. Things went on much as usual at the Red Cottage. Sir Oswald did not again join the guns at Oriels, but took frequent opportunities of strolling over of afternoons when Hilary was otherwise engaged.

He reported to Amelia the failure of the negotiations with Hilary. She was already

aware of the fact that the son of the St. Denises could not bear to see the stranger sit in the seat of his fathers.

"I think it's perfectly lovely of him," Amelia had said, "and I wouldn't have it otherwise for worlds. Still, if he would only forgive and make friends with us I should be perfectly happy."

Such manifestations of the Fitzgerald blood were for ever peeping out in Amelia, to the delight of the more intelligent of the Saxons among whom her present lot was cast.

"Which is to say that you can eat your cake and have it," said Mrs. Giggs, to whom the speech was made, joyously.

"I wish I could give it all to him," answered Amelia. "I should just love to do it."

"There would be only one way of doing it," said the widow, with pretended seriousness.

"And that?"

Mrs. Giggs laughed.

"You know he is little Peggy's, you naughty woman," said Amelia, blushing prettily. "By the way, I wonder he was able to resist you, even for that bud."

"I might be his mother," replied Mrs. Giggs, laughing and blushing in her turn.

"You will make a lovely stepmother," said Miss Brent. "There, Beatrice, don't tell me. The man is head over ears in love with you.



Maybe he doesn't know it, but he is. It's beautiful of him, of course, to be like that about his first wife, and I wouldn't change him for anything if I were you. Still, the sooner he finds out the better."

It was true that when Sir Oswald returned to find no Mrs. Giggs at Oriels he was conscious of a certain blank in his environment. If he hadn't been so very sure that his heart was buried in Claire's grave, he might have suspected it of sprouting again—to use a phrase of Amelia's to Mr. Pontifex, which had made the diplomat ask if she was thinking of cabbage hearts.

"I believe he was in love with her all the time," said Amelia to herself, watching Sir Oswald's air of having lost something. "Only men are so conservative."

Perhaps it was true. Anyhow, one afternoon, Sir Oswald, finding still no red-brown hair and eyes at Amelia's luncheon-table, left early, went back to the Red Cottage, where Hilary's bicycle stood in a lean-to shed—a wretched substitute for a horse, yet bicycles had their advantages, thought Sir Oswald—mounted it and rode to Acres.

Mrs. Giggs' reception of him was perfect. It was so quietly friendly. He took a cup of tea from her hand, and sat by the fire talking and forgetting time till a servant came in with the

lamps. The elderly gentlewoman, whose presence as an inhabitant of the house made it possible for Mrs. Giggs to do as she would in the matter of having male visitors, excused herself. She was of the old religion, and wished to attend Compline and Benediction in the Duke's chapel. Sir Oswald talked irresolutely of leaving. Mrs. Giggs suggested that he should stay to dinner, with herself and Miss Skene. Sir Oswald hesitated, then remembered that Hilary had gone to see an old chum, and might stay the night in his house, and consented.

"I am going to tell you something very strange, a most interesting piece of gossip, as a reward for your consenting to be dull," announced Mrs. Giggs.

"I may be dull, but I am very happy," answered Sir Oswald, looking towards a window as though he could see how fast the evening fell. "And what is the gossip?"

"Miss Skene tells me that one afternoon last week, when she was attending this service, which she does very often, a tall, veiled lady came into the chapel. You know it has a door opening on the park, so that anyone may attend the services. The lady kept her veil down, and the chapel was very dim, but just at the last Miss Skene happened to look up, and the lady had lifted her veil and was apparently drying her tears with her handkerchief. And who do

you suppose Miss Skene thought the lady to be?"

"How should I know? The Duchess of Wells, perhaps," said Sir Oswald, jocosely. A delightful sense of well-being seemed to wrap him round like a comfortable garment.

"The Duchess was in London that day, attending a meeting at Exeter Hall. One of the purposes was, I think, the translation of the Bible into Italian for the Pope and Cardinals, and for the Catholic Courts of Europe, the Duke told us. It was the day the Duke of St. Edmunds was at Oriels, looking so small and ascetic and almost insignificant beside the John Bullish other Duke. They were like this world and the other. So you see, it couldn't have been the Duchess of Wells, though I appreciate the humour of the suggestion. It was Lady Margaret."

Mrs. Giggs brought out her little bombshell with a placid enjoyment of the sensation it made.

"Lady Margaret! By Jove! The Duchess would have a fit if she knew."

"She mustn't know. We can't get the poor girl into trouble. It's the reaction from red flannel, I suppose."

"What would the Duke say?"

"The Duke has no prejudices. He always stands up for Meg, as he calls her. Perhaps she's unhappy about the marriage her mother is trying to make for her. If she should go over

to Rome, Mr. Searle would be in worse disgrace than ever with the Duchess, and a good many other people. He has no limitations; and then —his friendship with the priest!"

"Father Anselm is excellent company," said Sir Oswald, thoughtfully. "Our friends at Oriels think him so."

"Oh, Amelia has no prejudices. She's an odd girl. She's full of superstitions. You know her magic crystal? She pretends to think it forecasts the future."

"And does it?"

"I've certainly seen a queer kind of milky mist in it, but I could make out nothing. She is bitterly disappointed that Hilary will not make friends."

"He might, if he saw her," said Sir Oswald, shrewdly.

"Ah!" Mrs. Giggs sighed.

"What is it?"

"I couldn't wish little Peggy away. But if— Amelia is older than Hilary; but then, Hilary is just the kind of boy to fall in love with a woman older than himself."

"He didn't fall in love with you," said Sir Oswald, bluntly.

Mrs. Giggs blushed.

"I never encouraged anything of the sort," she answered. "Besides, he is the soul of honour. There was Peggy."

"Ah, and you were wishing there wasn't Peggy. What matchmakers you women are!"

"If he were to marry Amelia it would be like a storybook. It isn't as if——"

She broke off suddenly. Sir Oswald was looking at her.

"You may trust to us," he said, "never to see things from the point of view the world would call wise."

Her eyes dropped.

"May I call you Beatrice?" he went on. "Hilary does. Why should the boy have the privilege?"

"My marriage was a mad one," she said, irrelevantly. "I was only a child! One of the least painful things about it was the name it saddled me with—but that is one of the minor ills that sting."

"Change it, Beatrice," said Sir Oswald, putting his hand on hers.

She stepped back with a little cry.

"Not for Hilary's sake?" she said.

"For my own sake, Beatrice. There was a time when I had the thought that if I should ask you and you should say yes, it might mean that I could keep Oriels and spare my boy and myself. I put away the thought. There is only one thing justifies marriage."

"And that?"

"Need you ask it, Beatrice?" he said, taking her in his arms and kissing her hair.



CHAPTER XVII

THE VISION

AFTER all Hilary had not stayed the night at young Damarel's. A tender and uneasy thought of his father, who hated to be alone, and had spent a good many evenings in solitude lately, had gone with him as he went across country to his friend's house. A sudden imagination came to him of the lighting of his father's eyes when he should come in upon him at his solitary pipe. He knew how the hours dragged to Sir Oswald when he was away. Compassion for that weariness came upon him, with the result that, after dinner at the Damarels, he announced his intention of walking home—to the disgust of Lucy Damarel, who had put on her prettiest frock for her brother's handsome friend.

It was a dash of cold water to Hilary's fondness to come in and find no one where he had looked for an eager welcome.

Susan knew nothing of where the master had gone to. He had said he would be home for dinner, and everything was spoilt. Susan

had given up the attempt to keep things hot against the master's return.

How had he gone? Well, that was the queer thing. He had come in about two o'clock, soon after Master Hilary himself had started for the football match, where he was to meet young Damarel. He had taken Master Hilary's bicycle from its shed, and ridden off on it without saying where he was going.

"And his legs didn't look at home on it, neither," said Susan. "And how should they—that were used to a horse—and a beautiful pair of legs for a horse's back?"

Susan, it seemed, had had mysterious shivers up her back, and had heard ominous creakings through the house; all of which she was inclined to believe were signs that some harm had come to Sir Oswald and the bicycle.

Hilary laughed at these dismal tales. The odd thing to him was that his father should have taken the bicycle, since his expeditions were mostly within his walking powers, and he had always expressed a contempt for that method of locomotion. But he was not at all alarmed. There were half a dozen places his father might have gone to where they would have detained him for dinner. Finding the house lonely, Hilary lit a cigar and walked out in the tree-shaded road.

Just as his cigar came to an end he heard a

distant clock strike eleven. Without knowing it he had walked a considerable distance—had come within sight indeed of the gates of his old home.

They stood wide open, as though a carriage had driven out. There was no light in the lodge-windows. Doubtless Jerry Tuxham, who lived at the lodge, was in bed, reasoning with himself that no one would be the wiser if the gates stood open all night.

Acting on a sudden impulse Hilary walked inside, where he had never looked to find himself. His kennel-terrier, Snap, went at his heels, stopping now and again to roll himself in the grass. Snap was no longer a young dog, and had not forgotten the time when he was untravelled and Oriels was his home.

The house, a great, red, many-windowed pile, stood in an open space, clear of trees. As Hilary came within sight of it he leant on a paling to look at it. Lights glimmered here and there in the windows, and the dark mass of the house stood out against a blacker copse of trees beyond. The night was moonless, but not dark, full of stars.

The people in the house were evidently going to bed. Hilary left the avenue and walked across the smooth turf of the park till he met the low palings opposite the drawbridge, and vaulted over them. He had a

grim thought that, if Snap should take it into his head to bark, his master would probably be arrested for a midnight vagrant with designs upon what ought to have been his own property.

However, Snap was a dog of excellent discretion, so he followed his master quietly where he went.

Hilary walked slowly round the house, for the last time, he said to himself. He knocked his foot once against the heap of earth which had been dug up during the operation of converting the moat into a terraced garden. After that he was more wary and kept to the path.

The lights in the windows went out one by one. Hilary lifted the latch of the garden-gate and found it yield. He walked through the flower-garden which in its summer splendour had been his mother's pride, all dark and flowerless now.

He came out on the other side of the house, and was going as stealthily as though he were the midnight thief he must have seemed to anyone who had observed him, when he noticed in front of him an unusually bright light streaming out on the night. Someone had forgotten to pull down their blinds, and the room beyond was brilliantly illuminated by the electric light which had recently been laid on in the house.

Hilary hesitated a second, fearing to cross that brilliant path of light. He looked up at

the window nearest him — there were two of them — and saw that the little bulb of light projected just by the sash. He remembered the room, and how dimly it used to be lit by the candles in sconces on either side the dressing-table.

Suddenly someone approached the window and held something to the light. He could not see what it was, but he felt an unreasonable curiosity to know. It might be a picture in a case—a lock of hair. His thoughts ran on sentimental things.

The person was a lady, and young. She was wearing some sort of a white garment, and her fair hair, which had apparently just been brushed, stood out in a halo about her face. She scrutinised the thing she held, carefully, eagerly, turning it this way and that. Hilary longed to know what it was, but the charming head, which seemed to have as many poses as a bird's, came between him and the object when she held it close to the light. At last she flung it on the floor indignantly.

The young man watched her, fascinated. He had not looked for such delightful entertainment as this, and he forgot to wonder who she was. She was certainly bewilderingly pretty. The sleeves of the thing she wore fell away from her round arms as she stood with clasped hands looking after what she had flung

down. The garment was shaped to show the pretty curve of neck and shoulder. Seeing her there in the brilliant light, he had a sense of assisting at a stage-play—silent and motionless, as one becomes when the acting absorbs all one's interest.

After remaining so for some seconds, the lady suddenly flung up the window. Then she stooped to the ground and regained the object which she had thrown away.

She knelt down by the window-sill with her hands clasped, and looked into the night. It was such a mild winter night as our latitudes have known many of in recent years, and she seemed to find its moist breath pleasant on her face. Behind her Hilary could see the leaping reflection of the fire in a long mirror, and the flowery curtains of the bed.

Kneeling, she was almost level with him. He cowered back, feeling that he must be visible to her; as indeed he must have been only for the dazzling path of light in front of her which made the darkness on every side dense by force of contrast.

He wondered if he were really looking on at a stage-play. It was all unreal—theatrical. Perhaps she was rehearsing a scene from "Romeo and Juliet," or some other play whose situations approximated to it.

"But soft. What light through yonder window breaks?
Oh, 'tis the East, and Juliet is the sun."

he found himself murmuring, with something of real passion in his thoughts. The night, the scene, his youth intoxicated him. To-morrow it might be something to laugh at half-shamefacedly. To-night it was the world of romance, which is so close to youth that youth has only to leap the hedge and wander through a garden of roses.

The lady spoke. The words that fell on his listening ear were no such honeyed ones as those that sound through all time from the balcony in Verona.

"You downright fool of a thing!" she cried, apostrophising that which she held in her hand, "if you ever had any sense, as that old wretch in Genoa said you had, it has deserted you now. Why won't you tell me whether he will give up his senseless feud and come? But you won't. You will only just lie there and sparkle; or roll up a lot of mud in which I can see nothing. My! If you knew what a wretch I think you!"

Hilary listened in stupefaction. To whom—to what was she speaking? And whom was it she wanted to know about? He scarcely dared to breathe—standing there with his face averted, lest the light colour of it in the darkness of his hair should betray him. If she should discover



him would she scream and alarm the house? Hilary was not at all anxious about that. His long legs would carry him out of sight very quickly, and he knew every inch of the park, its short cuts, the places where the walls might easily be scaled. No one could catch him if once he was off. However, he had no fear of discovery so far as the necessity for flight went. What he really did fear was lest anything should prevent his seeing the matter out to the end. And he should be sorry to frighten so lovely a creature.

Suddenly his own name struck on his ear:

"Hilary! Hilary!"

Just so must have sounded that "Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?" from the balcony at Verona.

"To think you are over there," she went on, "such a little way from us, that I can see your chimney-pots, yet utterly refusing to have anything to do with us! Why, I'd just adore to give it all back to you, Hilary! You know it's delightfully romantic of you, and just, I daresay, what that dear Lady Celia, whose face I know by heart because they tell me it is yours, would have done. But it's out of date, Hilary! Do give it up and come and make friends with us!"

Amelia was laughing at herself, apostrophising the night and the stars. She looked

vaguely in the direction of the Red Cottage, which she could not have seen even by daylight, since the walls and trees of Oriels shut it out. She extended her arms towards it. She had come to imagine herself a little in love with the young gentleman whom she and Tom had dispossessed, and Sir Oswald's courtly ways had completed what her lively imagination had begun. She felt that dear as Oriels was, it would be a delightfully romantic thing to give it up to the original owners. She didn't quite see, of course, how it was to be accomplished, since little Peggy at the Rectory stood in the way of any such arrangement as that which Mrs. Giggs had suggested.

Sir Oswald had told her that Hilary had made up his mind to be a stranger to Oriels, and Hilary had a will of his own. Still Amelia had not given up hope. She had a well-founded belief in the power of her own fascinations, and she had never before exercised them with her heart in the game. Only if Peggy were not there, it would be so much easier; that is to say if Hilary's heart was yet to be won.

Amelia drew back after her whimsical call into the night. She stood up slowly, and once again held her hand open to the light. Hilary could see her eyes in the dark shadow; mysterious under the light lashes. For fully five minutes she looked down at what she held.



It was a glass ball, he could see now, perfectly round, and swung from a thin gold chain. For a second she dangled it.

Then, with a sudden impatient movement, she turned to the window.

"There! Go, you wretched thing! I don't believe you know a single thing about it," she said, and flung the ball from her.

There was a sudden sharp cry from the darkness. Amelia heard it, and stood an instant in a terrified attitude listening; then leant from the window.

"Who is there?" she cried. "Have I hurt any one?"

But there was not a sound.

With quick presence of mind she turned off the light. Then she leant from the window again, trying to see through the darkness.

For a few seconds she could see nothing. The glare of the light was yet in her eyes. Then she thought she saw at a little distance a dark figure crossing the grass of the park, and something white at its heels.

She banged down the window and rushed upstairs to her brother. Tom sat by his dressing-room fire reading. Unless one read at night there wasn't much time at Oriels; and Tom's book was fascinating enough to keep him into the small hours.

Into his ears his sister poured a wild tale.



"You flung your crystal out of the window, and heard a cry, and think you struck someone," he repeated after her. "My dear Em, what a wild thing to do!"

"Yes, wasn't it? Perfectly ridiculous! But the stupid fool of a thing wouldn't tell me anything. But that isn't it, Tom. You are so slow, dear fellow! Do come down and see if you can find the poor thing whom I struck."

"You think he or she is still there? You haven't dreamt it all, Amelia?"

"Do I look as if I'd been dreaming? No, I don't suppose the person is there. Indeed I am nearly sure I saw a figure making off across the park, with a white dog following."

"Let us see if we can find any trace of the individual. Stay where you are, Em, till I come back."

But Miss Brent's excitement would not permit this. She accompanied her brother downstairs, and throwing a cloak from the hall over her head, she went out with him across the drawbridge to the path where Hilary had stood.

There was no trace of anyone; not that they could have seen beyond a short distance. Nor, though Brent lit nearly a whole box of matches, could he find any trace of the bauble Amelia had flung out of the window.

They returned indoors talking in whispers.

"It would be particularly awkward," said





Tom Brent, "if Briggs were to hear us and shoot at us for burglars."

"I don't suppose he can shoot a bit," Amelia whispered back.

They stood a minute or two in the corridor outside Amelia's bedroom.

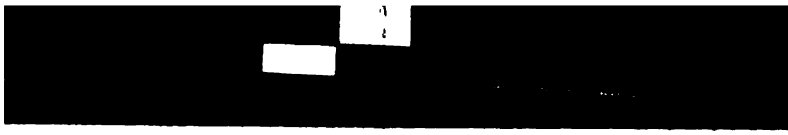
"If all this is really true and not a fancy of yours," said Tom, "I want to know who could have been loitering about the house at this hour—and with what intention?"

"I want to know, too," echoed Amelia.

"You'd better be more prudent about your windows. You're very near the ground," said Tom.

Amelia looked at him with a scared face as though a thought had suddenly struck her.

"My goodness gracious!" she cried, and then shut the door in Tom's face.



CHAPTER XVIII

THE FAIR PENITENT

MORNING brought no magic crystal to light, though Amelia was out early and searched carefully.

There was, however, something to corroborate her story, for in the wet earth flung up from the moat there were footprints here and there —a man's footprints, but slight: quite unlike the hob-nailed impressions made by the gardeners and gardeners' helpers.

Amelia pointed triumphantly to these for refutation of Tom's theory that she had dreamt the whole happening.

"Oh, I believe you," he said, "and whoever received that missile of yours has apparently carried it off. He earned it too. The thing was as big as a potato. We'd better say nothing about it, my girl. It sounds rather a mad story."

"It does," said Amelia, frankly. "I wish I could believe the crystal had killed whoever stood there. No; I'm not likely to talk about it."

Nor did she even to her dear friend, Edith



Lascelles. Perhaps she might have told Mrs. Giggs something of it, but that lady was inexplicably absent. Of late she had been fond of driving over to Oriels—or flying little notes to Amelia if she did not come, but several days passed and there was no word from her.

It was the fourth or fifth day from the incident of the crystal when Amelia set out for a walk to the village. This time she took a round, so as not to pass the Red Cottage. In her own mind she was dreadfully uneasy as to the person who had overheard her whimsical ranting. How might he or she not have interpreted it? She had it in her mind that she had mentioned Hilary's name—not once, but many times. Bother him, Amelia said! Why had she ever troubled about him at all? She wished she could see Mrs. Giggs to lay the case before her. Of course, Beatrice would laugh, and mimic Amelia's "Well!" and "My!" But it would be a comfort to tell someone, and see how the affair looked to unprejudiced eyes.

Her thoughts were hard at work grinding upon each other, as the corn is crushed between the stones, when she was aware of Sir Oswald St. Denis approaching her.

They exchanged greetings, and Amelia reproached him for absenting himself from Oriels.

"To tell you the truth, I've been a good deal worried," he began.

"You don't say so," said Amelia. "I was just thinking as you came up to me how remarkably cheerful you looked."

"You thought so really?" Sir Oswald looked rather conscience-stricken. "Well, I suppose, 'tis only natural to forget one's worries sometimes."

"Now, what are they all about?" asked Amelia, in the interested way which was natural to her.

Sir Oswald lifted his hat aud passed his hand over his forehead.

"You're so exceedingly sympathetic, my dear Miss Brent, that I feel I really must tell you. It's the most extraordinary business. Last Monday night my boy was dining with friends, and I took the opportunity of his absence to pay a long-deferred call—in fact"—Sir Oswald coughed—"I took Hilary's bicycle and rode over to Acres."

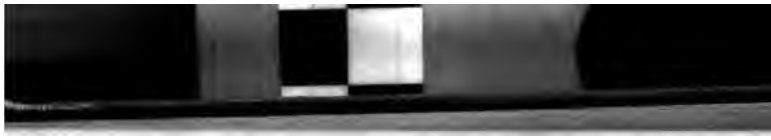
"Ah!" said Amelia. "That explains why she hasn't been to see me."

"I don't see the connection," suggested Sir Oswald, with embarrassment.

"I should suppose you've been there several times since," said Amelia, sweeping her upward look at thc man's shy and beaming face.

"You're a white witch, Miss Amelia," he answered. "You've supposed the truth."

"You couldn't have told me anything much



lovelier," cried Amelia, enthusiastically. "I think your news is downright sweet, and I congratulate you, Sir Oswald."

"I'm very much obliged to you, I'm sure. Beatrice will tell you herself, no doubt; but, as a matter of fact, no one knows yet, not even Hilary."

Again the little shadow of trouble clouded the lover's face which Sir Oswald could not help wearing.

"I haven't told the boy," he went on hastily, "because he's suffering, poor lad. I was going to tell you about him, Miss Brent, but you put it out of my head. I came home from Acres that evening to hear that Hilary had returned before me and had gone out for a walk and smoke while waiting for me. It was quite a time before he came back, and when he did, the poor boy was in acute pain. It seems he had met with some kind of an accident—he won't talk about it—but something, perhaps a branch of a tree, perhaps a night-bird, had struck him violently in the eye."

Amelia uttered an exclamation.

"Yes," Sir Oswald repeated; "had struck him violently in the eye. He's been in the greatest possible pain with it since, and most absurdly refuses to see a doctor. I think I shall have to run up to town with him unless ——. The eye is shockingly inflamed, and you know, it is not a thing to be tampered with.



He might—why, God bless my soul, he might be blinded for life!"

Again Amelia uttered such a sharp exclamation of distress that Sir Oswald looked at her curiously.

"I have made you quite pale," he said with contrition. "What a compassionate heart you have!"

"We never heard of the accident," she murmured, with averted face.

"Of course, you didn't. He won't have it talked about. That's the odd thing. I've had to make excuses for him at the Rectory—where he used to go pretty often. I don't know what's come over the lad. But, of course, you can't argue with a person suffering such pain as his."

"Is it so bad?" Amelia asked in a low voice.

"It is pretty bad. And you see the enforced idleness is worse. Why, by Jove, I never thought of it before: if the eye should prove to be injured it will damn him—I beg your pardon, Miss Brent—for the army."

"Oh, don't think of anything so dreadful," cried Amelia, turning swimming eyes upon him.

"I won't," said Sir Oswald, melted by such evidences of her tenderness. "I shall hope for the best. I am going to suggest to him to-day that he should move over to Acres. You know Sir Joseph Prentice, the famous eye-doctor, is Beatrice's neighbour. She thought he would look at the eye and advise us."



"You think your son will do that?"

"I really hope he will. I've an idea that he won't let me call in Selby here, lest he should talk. It seems too ridiculous, doesn't it? Of course, Selby is an old woman for gossip, and it is quite true, as the lad says, that he's not fit to doctor a chicken. After all, what could there be in the manner of his accident to make him keep it a secret?"

"I should certainly get him over to Acres," said Amelia. She looked quite small in her velvet and furs, like a gorgeous little bird, pinched and puffed with cold.

"I will suggest it to him as soon as I go home," said Sir Oswald, gratefully. "You won't speak about it, of course?"

"I shall be perfectly dumb."

"I can never forget your kind sympathy with me and mine."

So they parted.

About an hour later Amelia burst tempestuously on Mrs. Giggs, who in an exceedingly trim pink cloth gown sat writing a letter at her desk.

"How did you guess it?" she asked, holding out both hands in welcome.

"Oh, I saw it in his face; Sir Oswald's I mean. It's as grateful as a Thanksgiving turkey. But that wasn't what brought me, you selfish woman. You see before you a heart-broken Amelia."

Mrs. Giggs laughed.

"Well, take off your hat—of course, you'll stay to lunch—and tell me all about it."

"I'll stay, but I shall never eat again. No, don't laugh, Beatrice. It's too mean of you. Can't you see that I'm wilted, by my face?"

"Now that I look closely I do see about a dozen wrinkles. But perhaps I could sympathise better if you told me what it is all about. No, Tom, you really mustn't"—to the Persian cat who had jumped on to Amelia's shoulder—"he's too selfish, and is always turning out poor Fay"—Fay was an ancient and doddering Maltese—"because the poor thing's too old to defend herself. Go on, Amelia. Tom becomes you—like a fur boa."

Amelia plunged into the recital of her troubles. As she listened, alternate fun and gravity chased each other across the widow's face, but she made no comment till Amelia had finished and sat with parted lips awaiting her friend's verdict.

"And so it was you who nearly blinded poor Hilary?" she said at length.

"You are horribly crude, Bee."

"I can't help admiring the boy's loyalty to you. He is endangering his eye rather than run the risk of betraying you."

"It's too lovely of him. But what am I to do, Beatrice?"

"Do! Well, I know what I am going to



do. I was writing a note to his father when you came in, to say that Sir Joseph had consented, as a special favour to me, to see him. I'm sending the note by the coachman, who will take over the brougham after lunch, and bring back Hilary and his father."

Amelia drew a deep breath of relief.

"Do you suppose he will ever forgive me?"

"You will have to ask him."

"I should never dare."

"It was odd his taking your crystal unless he meant to return it to you himself. I expect he will tell me all about it—barring your speeches, Amelia. He tells me everything."

"Will you let him know that I ask his forgiveness?"

"You must do it yourself, Amelia, as soon as his eye is better."

"I should never dare to."

"Hilary is not at all formidable. Fancy Peggy not knowing!"

"Yes, I can't understand that. I wouldn't have been put off with excuses."

"The course of Hilary's love affairs runs smoothly, Amelia. There are no boulders in the way. It is a quiet sort of little stream, with few depths."

"It's quite idyllic," said Amelia. "Tom thinks Peggy too fascinating. I don't believe he ever admired a girl so much. Tom is a slow coach, and doesn't fall in love easily."

Mrs. Giggs looked at her thoughtfully.

"I wonder if it will come to anything between Hilary and Peggy," she said.

"Why not?" asked Amelia, with a startled air.

"Of course, I can make things easier for Hilary now that he is to be my son," said Mrs. Giggs with a delightful blush. "He can go into a cavalry regiment—as it was at first intended. Perhaps now that the difficulties are cleared away, they may find that they are not so absolutely necessary to each other after all."

"How very odd that would be!" was Amelia's only comment.

A day or two later one of Mrs. Giggs' little notes reached Amelia.

"Sir Joseph has seen him, and says there will be no permanent injury, though he will have to keep quiet for a while. I spoke to Hilary about your share in the accident and your contrition. He says you are not to think twice about it; it was his own fault for being a trespasser. He wanted to write to you; but he ought not to work his solitary eye. I said you would come to see him one day. What about Tuesday?"

Amelia's courage seemed to have deserted her. Twenty times between that day and the day appointed she made up her mind that she could not face Hilary even though he had only one eye to look at her with.



However, Tuesday found her on the road. She had taken whatever courage was left to her in both hands, and she had allowed Mrs. Giggs to include Tom in her invitation lest at the last moment her courage should fail.

She had told Tom that it was Hilary whom she had struck with the crystal, and that she was going to make her amende, and he had encouraged her, saying that doubtless the youth would feel so embarrassed at having been prowling about Oriels by night that she would have to forgive him.

"And why he should do it," said downright Tom, "when the front door stood open to him, I don't know. I'm inclined to write young St. Denis down an ass."

"Oh, no," said Amelia. "Can't you understand, Tom, that he never meant to come, only yielded to a sudden temptation to look upon the home of his fathers?"

"It would have been worse than your crystal if he'd been mistaken for a burglar," grumbled Tom, who, Amelia had noticed, was not inclined to be sympathetic where Hilary was concerned.

Amelia's confidence was somewhat restored when Hilary and she came face to face, by his obvious embarrassment.

"I am so sorry," she began, putting out her hand to meet his clasp. "Can you ever forgive me?"



"Can you ever forgive me for being there? The accident was nothing. I shall be all right in a little while."

"You know," she said, hanging her head shyly, "You heard what I said.!"

"I heard something. I was not sure it was meant for me."

"It was a jest. I was talking nonsense."

"I hope some of it was true."

"It was true that I wanted to be friends. I wanted you to come to Oriels, and to forgive us for being intruders. Your father had told me you would not forgive us."

"I had not seen you then," replied Hilary, simply.

Amelia blushed delightfully. Even the one eye saw that and was pleased.

"I have your trinket for you," he went on.

"Hateful thing!" said Amelia. "I shall never forgive it."

"I have no grudge against it."

"That is too magnanimous of you."

"It has made us friends, Miss Brent."

"Oh, I am glad of that," said Amelia.

Mrs Giggs looked with a little misgiving at Amelia's face after the interview.

"You seem to have made it all right," she said.

"He was just lovely," replied Amelia. "We are going to be friends. I think that dear Lady



Celia in the picture-gallery must have brought it about. I used to talk to her of it."

"I am very glad," said Mrs. Giggs: and then added with apparent irrelevence, "Hilary knows about us, and has accepted me. He is a dear boy. I have told him what I will do for him. Little Peggy has been here. I suppose he told her. She did not seem unduly elated."

"I think she is a cold-hearted little wretch, that Peggy," said Amelia.

CHAPTER XIX

CONFESSION

PEGGY had brought back all the news to the Rectory, having stayed a night under Mrs. Giggs' hospitable roof. Even Peggy had not known, when Mrs. Giggs invited her over to dine and sleep, that Hilary was there. Perhaps if Mrs. Searle had known as much she might have put difficulties in the way. However, she had not, and Mrs. Giggs was a person of importance and wealth. Mrs. Searle sent off Peggy with her blessing.

Peggy came back to find her father absent, spending the night with a sick friend, and sat down to a nondescript evening meal with her mother. They ate almost in silence. Mrs. Searle mentioned that she had had a letter from Mrs. Grace announcing that her husband was ill—a slight pleurisy, the doctors said; but much as Mrs. Searle was given to take all the Grace affairs on her shoulders, it did not to Peggy's mind explain the gloom, greater than usual, by which her mother was evidently hagridden.



After the meal they left the cold dining-room for the drawing-room, where a tiny fire burned. It was one of Mrs. Searle's economies to dispense with the comforts of life whenever her husband was absent, Women like her run to thinking that it is only men who need creature comforts. All her life Peggy had associated papa's absence with short commons and fireless rooms and long gloamings in the grey stone Rectory-house, where the lamps were not lit till night was quite down upon everything.

Mrs. Searle when they entered the drawing-room sank into her armchair with a sigh. For an instant she leaned back, her eyes closed, her hands idle in her lap. Then habit asserted itself. She sat up and drew towards her a basket full of mending.

Peggy watched her, but did not interfere. Mrs Searle was not one to allow her burdens to be taken from her. Peggy watched her adjust a patch neatly. Then she began to unpack her budget of news.

"Sir Oswald and Hilary were there," she said.

A week ago she would have mentioned the fact with greater misgiving. Not that she feared her mother, or had less than the old spirit to assert herself where Hilary was concerned; but the unhappiness darkening over her mother's face when the subject of Hilary came uppermost was something she had learnt to fear of late.



Mrs. Searle started at Peggy's speech.

"I am tired of the St. Denises," she began peevishly. "I can't imagine what your father sees in Sir Oswald."

"He is to marry Mrs. Giggs," put in Peggy, stemming the torrent of her mother's words.

"Ah: So she has consented to that," said Mrs. Searle, forgetting her private troubles in the interest of hearing a real bit of news.

"He looks radiant, and so does she."

"It will make a difference to the St. Denises."

"Hilary is to join a cavalry regiment after all. She is wonderfully kind to him. She could hardly be better if he were her own son."

The maid came in and lit the lamp. Peggy sat drumming idly on the table, her face in the full light. Mrs. Searle's face was in shadow, her head inclined away from Peggy, so that she might get the light on her mending.

There was a pause. Peggy picked off a withered leaf or two from the vase of flowers nearest to her. The room was chilly. There was an absence of good-fellowship always noticeable when the Rector was away. Mrs. Searle would have died many times over for her husband or her daughter. It was her misfortune that her personality was a chilly one. Peggy could never remember the time when she had sought warmth and comfort in her mother's arms. It was always to her father she had fled when she was a little child and needed comfort.



Cuthbert Searle was perhaps the only person in the world who knew the love, incapable of expression, under his wife's cold exterior. For its sake doubtless he had loved and married her —a thing which had never ceased to be a matter of wonder to his friends.

Presently Mrs. Searle leant forward, so that Peggy could only see her shoulders and the line of her back—a curved line which suggested pain and delicacy.

"Are you very fond of Hilary, Peggy?" she asked in a low voice.

"Why of course I am," replied Peggy. "Didn't we grow up together? And wasn't Hilary always a dear boy? I remember your saying so yourself in the old days; that no one could be pleasanter in the house than Hilary."

It was a curious answer for Peggy to make, and so it struck her mother.

"Do you think Hilary could do without you, Peggy?" she asked again.

"Well, he isn't going to be asked to," answered Peggy, in her sweet little voice, prepared for combat if necessary, though she didn't want to be disagreeable with poor mamma.

Mrs. Searle bent a little lower.

"Unless your Uncle Joe is better you will not go to Streatham Hill till later. But Fred writes that he will come down at Christmas."



"What for? He was here so lately."

Peggy's voice had a ring of alarm in it, which her mother noticed and shivered at.

"I don't think your heart is really in this affair with Hilary at all," she said.

"I am fonder of him than of anyone in the world except papa—and you" replied Peggy.

Mrs. Searle smiled at the childishness of the answer; but it was a sad smile.

"I don't think Hilary's heart is in it either," she went on making a bold stroke.

"Hilary is very fond of me" said Peggy, unbelievingly. "He told me two years ago that he couldn't live without me."

"Ah, two years ago! He seems to have done very well. And now, he is always running up to town: and he is at Acres and you knew nothing of it. It was not like that when your father and I were lovers."

"As for his being at Acres I forgot to tell you that he had an accident to his eye. Something struck him in the eye one dark night when he was out under the trees, I didn't exactly understand what, a branch most likely."

"And he did not let you know?"

"He did not let me know," repeated Peggy, defiantly. "I suppose he thought I would have been unhappy. Mrs. Giggs carried him over there, so that her friend, Sir Joseph, might cure his eye. As for his running up to town, and all



that, he knows he is free to do what he will. We are good comrades."

Peggy's eyes were flashing blue fire, and the moss rose had become a cabbage rose.

"Don't be angry with me," said her mother, humbly. "I have always thought that it was a generous instinct of yours that led you into that engagement with Hilary. You know your father —and he does no wrong in your sight—would not hear of its being a binding engagement."

"He thought we were too young."

"He thought as I thought—and think."

"I thought you would be better satisfied," said Peggy, piteously, "now that Sir Oswald is to marry Mrs. Giggs. She is very rich."

"It might have made a difference some years ago," said Mrs. Searle, suddenly dropping the mending in her lap and covering her face with her hands. "Now it is too late."

Peggy felt quite shocked and alarmed. She had never seen her mother display strong emotion, and she hardly knew how to meet it. She would have flown to her father in similar circumstances. She went shyly to her mother's side and laid a hand softly on her arm.

"What is it?" she asked in a whisper. "What is the matter, mamma? You have done too much for us. You are always doing too much."

"I used to think it would come to an end sometime," answered Mrs. Searle, between her



sobs. "Everyone used to say your father would be a bishop. He has more brains, to say nothing of his goodness, than half the Bench of Bishops. But he has never had preferment. He never will have it now. He has thrown away his chances of it. He has refused the money that was lawfully his. We grow poorer and poorer. I have been keeping the wolf from the door ever since you were born. The struggle has worn me out."

"You would not let me help you," said Peggy, miserably, stealing an arm about her neck.

"I had to do it alone, child. It was something, after a time, in which no one could help me."

"I did not know we were so poor," said Peggy, wonderingly. "Of course, we have had to do without things, but we had all we really needed. I'm sure papa and I were happy enough with what we had."

"Your father's income has dwindled year by year. The house has had to be kept up, and we have had to keep the poor people going in the hard winters, even though they preferred Mr. Babcock to your father. The rich people here would do little. It all fell on us. Your father gave with both hands—like a rich man. He never asked where it was to come from."

"His wisdom is of the other world," said Peggy, in wistful defence.



"Do you think I am blaming him?" said Mrs. Searle, with sudden fierceness. "Have I ever blamed him in all my life? Have I ever murmured?—ever shown a cold face to his friends, even when he made himself conspicuous with a Romanist priest, giving a handle to that man Babcock against him, and mortally offending the Duchess? Hasn't everything he did been right to me? I tell you, child, you have never had a glimpse of what love means!"

Peggy felt as though the solid earth were falling to pieces about her. She had never dreamt of such fires beneath her mother's cold exterior. Mentally, in the midst of her confusion, she found time to contrast her calm feeling for Hilary with this suddenly-revealed passion which neither time nor use had had power to attenuate.

"And now in the result," went on the mother, "it is you and he who think alike—you and he who have never an unexpressed thought between you. I haven't kept up to him. My mind has been frayed away in petty economies and worse things. I am not his equal."

"Oh, hush! hush!" said Peggy, pressing her soft lips to her mother's. "That at least is not true. He knows, and I know, your heroic selflessness. He thinks there is no one like you? If there have been frets, what are they? It is only that we are mortal. But there is nothing I would not do for you, mother dear."

She pressed the head, prematurely grey, against her round young breast. So this was the mother she had been contented to think chilly in the blood, more than a little worldly, all her growing years; this suffering, sacrificed woman.

"There is nothing I would not do for you," she repeated.

"I never meant to say as much as this to you, Peggy," Mrs. Searle answered, setting herself free from the girl's embrace. "I wanted your father and you to be happy to the end. I don't think I shall live very long, Peggy. See my wrists—how thin they are; and the hollows about the bones! And my neck has fallen away—it was once pretty and plump, like yours. It would be the easiest way, if only I could be sure that you and he were in easy circumstances and no longer needed me to keep off disagreeable things."

"As though we could be happy without you!" cried Peggy, kneeling by her mother, and kissing the thin hands in a passion of tenderness and remorse.

"Listen, Peggy, I have a trouble—a secret that is burning up my life. You can save me, little daughter, if you will. It was for your father's sake and yours that I sinned."

Peggy listened, her eyes growing wide with apprehension. Yet her hand never relaxed its



hold upon her mother's trembling one. If there was anything she, Peggy, could do to relieve all that anguish, to extinguish the fire that was indeed burning up her mother's vitality, she would do it.

"What is it?" she asked in a whisper.

Mrs. Searle began to rock herself to and fro.

"We owe your Uncle Joe three thousand pounds," she whispered back, with a nervous look at the door, as though someone might be listening.

"Three thousand pounds!"

"It was not much, spread over all those years. Sometimes the income almost disappeared. Your father would never press for the tithes, and the people were only too ready to take advantage. He never thought how we were living."

"Three thousand pounds! How could he ever have hoped to repay it?" asked Peggy in a dazed voice.

"He knows nothing about it. I borrowed it in his name. I gave I.O.U.'s in his name. I thought you would marry Fred one day and that it would be all right. You know how methodical the Graces are. Your uncle has those I.O.U.'s. If he were to die to-morrow and the estate was being adjusted, your father would be asked to repay. Then he would know that I had given the things in his name. His



knowing it would kill me. I could not live an hour under his contempt."

Peggy listened as though it were some strange, unbelievable romance or stage-play in which she could have no real interest.

"You only mean that you signed for him?" she said.

"I traced his signature upon the stamped paper and then went over it with pen and ink. Joe would have his formal I.O.U. After the first time I did not mind so much doing it."

"Weren't you afraid Uncle Joe would speak of it to papa?" asked Peggy in a heart-broken voice.

"I was not. It was all arranged through Minnie. Men—even men like Joe Grace—are handsomer about money matters than women. He understood that it was not pleasant to borrow money. I knew he would never refer to it."

"I must have troubled you all those years"—Peggy was seeing more clearly now—"when I would take no trouble to be civil to Matilda and Marianne and Rhoda and Sophia, nor even to Carrie and Maria. I was often horrid to Fred, too. How I must have troubled you! And—how did Uncle Joe, as a business man, suppose that the money was ever to be paid back? I can't understand that. There is so much I can't understand."

"He never did expect it. It was a project of his, to return the things the day you married





Fred. He was to give them to me out of delicacy to your father. Minnie told me. The whole thing was done between Minnie and me."

"And if I should not marry Fred?"

"The things would lie there, I suppose. Can you imagine what a menace they have been to me, Peggy? They have almost killed me."

"You should have told me before," answered Peggy, looking at those hollow wrists.

"I should die before I could meet your father's eyes, if it were to come to light. Ah, Peggy, you don't know how it happened, by degrees; and some of the money was already spent before I knew that Joe Grace demanded an I.O.U. I never foresaw how it would grow. It began with fifty pounds at a time. We owed so much money."

Peggy's mind was working hard. Plainly her mother had not realised the legal crime she had committed. The fear in her eyes was not of the law, or of disgrace, it was the fear of her husband's contempt. As for herself, Peggy, there was only one thing to be done. Hilary must think what he would of her. Even at this moment her heart was not torn asunder because she must give up Hilary. As for marrying Fred, she could not yet think upon that too closely. A certain numbness had come over her thoughts. When the time came God would strengthen her. Cuthbert Searle's daughter

could not be incredulous of the unseen world, and happily was not.

She stooped and kissed the hollows in her mother's wrists as a devout lover might kiss his mistress's dimples. Through all the incredible, unrealised trouble that had come upon herself her heart yet ached over the mother she had never really known. At all costs she must be saved.

"I will accept Fred whenever he asks me," she said.

Poor Mrs. Searle's eyes overflowed — they had been dry all this time—overflowed in natural tears of relief. Peggy let her tears flow. Presently the woebegone eyes looked at her, and the tension of them had vanished.

"You will save my life and perhaps my reason," said the mother. "But, oh, little daughter, tell me that I have not broken your heart."

"Broken my heart, indeed!" repeated Peggy, with unabated spirit, although she felt her world in ruins. "Grow well and I shall be happy! You will see that my heart is not broken, dearest mamma."

Rather than meet the wistful, faded eyes, she went to the piano and struck a note or two. Then she began to sing. Peggy had a sweet little linnet's pipe of a voice—

"My love is like a red, red rose."



She was the very girl for whom the song was made; her nearest approach to pallor was when she took the hue of a monthly rose, but for this one night her damask roses did not fade. She would think of nothing but of the mother who had had less than justice all these years, and who needed all her daughter's generosity now.

CHAPTER XX

THE BALL

BECAUSE Peggy was not heartbroken she would dance at Lady Egdon's ball.

There had been some trouble about a chaperon. Mrs. Giggs, who had expressed her willingness to act in that capacity before Peggy had so ruthlessly whistled Hilary down the wind, had shown such disapproval of her since that the thing was obviously out of the question.

"I promised to take that little wretch," she mentioned to Amelia Brent. "But now, of course, it must be off, even if I could forgive her—which I can't. Oswald is going with me. And he is furious against Peggy. He can't understand the father either. It seems that Peggy has jilted poor Hilary for the rich middle-class cousin whom you must have met there, Amelia—a horrid little person. I'm middle-class myself; but I'm not horrid. Mr. Searle, though evidently grieved and puzzled over it, stands by Peggy."

'Why shouldn't he? Sir Oswald didn't expect him to round on his own daughter?"



"I think he did. He rather expected her to be put on bread and water and locked up in her room till she came to her right senses. He doesn't think that any girl in her senses could refuse Hilary."

"You don't think there's anything behind it, Bee? Little Peggy carries a brave face, but it strikes me that her pink petals are just a trifle wilted."

"I hadn't thought of it, Amelia. Girls are so independent nowadays. I wouldn't trust the mother. That cold, blue eye. But I can't see what pressure she could have brought on Peggy to make her throw over Hilary. So strange too, when his prospects are so much brighter."

"Depend upon it, Bee, there's something at the back of it. Anyhow, I wouldn't be too hard on Peggy if I were you. I don't think you are sorry on the whole either."

"I am not," replied Mrs. Giggs, with an emphasis at which, for some reason or other, Amelia blushed. "Still it isn't likely I'd forgive her for playing fast and loose with my boy."

"I believe she's straight," said Amelia, with conviction. "So does Tom. Tom's inclined to plank down his last coin on Peggy. Every one's against her, though they ought to be grateful to her for giving them something to talk about. It's this aristocratic old country of



yours. That little Peggy Searle, the parson's daughter, should presume to do a jilt, especially to one of themselves! She'll go to the ball, because she has the courage to do it; and all the old hens will peck at her. I tell you what, Bee, I'll take care of Peggy myself."

So it was that Peggy entered the ballroom at Dulverton Castle with Tom and Amelia Brent.

Anything more modest or glowing than Peggy could not well be imagined. She had a wreath of roses on her hair, and that and her bouquet, a long trailing thing of roses and pink ribbon, made the only colour, except her face, amid the masses of fleecy white which was her ball-dress.

She held her head high, and her eyes were like sapphires—something of the sparkle of steel in them, too, for Peggy had met with a good deal of coldness during the last few weeks.

Amelia wore her favourite lilac, chiffon over silk, and her bouquet was a mass of purple orchids.

There were craned necks among the languid young gentlemen who stood about the doors of the ballroom as the two girls passed in. Lady Egdon had filled her house with dancing men, knowing that the county provided dancing girls in plenty. The faultlessly tailored crowd began to grow interested. Lady Egdon



smiled, well pleased, as she greeted the two pretty girls. The country-girls were apt to be a little slow for want of appreciation. Presently she had her hands full with the number of gilded youths who asked for introductions to Miss Brent and Peggy.

The Duchess of Wells put up her eye-glass as the two girls, with Tom Brent in tow, approached the raised dais where she was sitting, with poor Lady Margaret almost hidden between her and another large dowager.

Lady Margaret was in disgrace. She had refused Mr. Sackville, and, what was worse, her father had upheld her. When the Duke chose to forget his mangel wurzels and shorthorns and interfere in the ordinary affairs of life he knew how to assert himself.

"I never liked the man, Theodora," he said, "and I wouldn't have given him Meg, if it had come to that, and my opinion was asked. He wasn't fit for my girl. Let him return to his—"

The Duke was only about to quote Scripture, but her Grace's stony face of horror dried up the fountains of his speech.

"Never mind," he said, "you know what I mean. And as for Meg, I won't have her bullied. I won't have Meg bullied, Theodora."

So Lady Margaret, although rather eclipsed between the Duchess and Mrs. Vere, looked not uncheerful while she awaited the first dance,

in which Lord Egdon's son and heir was to be her partner. She was unusually well-dressed, too. Her father had seen to that, and she was looking, not pretty, but something better.

The Duchess found it difficult to reconcile a certain friendliness towards Amelia with an icy disapproval of her companion, especially as Amelia was not inclined to allow anything of the sort.

"I've brought Miss Searle, Duchess," she said. "Now, isn't she pretty? Isn't it noble of me to allow myself to be cut out like that?"

The Duchess smiled frostily.

"You would always be noble, my dear Miss Brent," she said; and Lady Margaret smiled at Peggy, a good honest smile that interposed itself between her mother's cold eyes and Peggy's pink prettiness.

"I hear," said Mrs. Vere, as the Brent party passed on, "that the youth the little girl is to marry is fabulously rich."

"Indeed," answered her Grace, showing some interest. "I understood him to be of the moderately wealthy bourgeois class. Not that it makes any difference to me, of course, as it would to a good many people. Still, it gives a reason for the marriage. The jilting of young St. Denis is not then so heartless a thing as we had supposed?"

"Perhaps she might have gone one better,"



said Mrs. Vere, cynically. "That American young man looks as though he could not take his eyes off her."

"I didn't notice it," replied her Grace, coldly, with a glance at her daughter. Eligible young men were scarce in these parts, and since Lady Margaret had rejected her mother's match-making for her it was necessary to look somewhere else. For the Brents Lady Margaret had manifested a gentle liking from the beginning, which was perhaps a reason why her Grace was patient with Amelia's flippant ways, which she really detested.

To Lady Egdon's mind Tom Brent did not quite do his duty. He danced with Lady Margaret several times, but Lady Margaret only danced square dances. It was a prudery in her which her mother could not understand. He was ready to lead out any number of neglected maids and matrons at Lady Egdon's suggestion; but after he had danced with them and done all that courtesy required he was sure to meet her eye presently, standing in some obscure corner with the quiet, bright look of waiting for someone or something, which vaguely annoyed his hostess. Poor Lady Egdon! Her Muriel was dancing a great many times too often with that hopeless ineligible, Charlie Stapleton, the best-looking and the most impecunious of all the young men in their set.

Peggy danced away the hours with one and another. A ball was still something wonderful to her, and she could not help enjoying it, for all the cloud that lay ahead of her.

She could not but feel that she was one of the most admired girls present. There was hardly a pause between her dances, and she could have had partners for six times as many. Now and again she caught sight of Tom Brent, and wondered why he had not asked her to dance. He was always dancing with someone rather uninteresting—or he was standing with his air of waiting. Whenever he met Peggy's eye he sent her a kind smile. Yet he had not asked her to dance, though early in the evening he had held her programme in his hand and speculated playfully on the rush there would be to fill it. He was to take her in to supper; that was all he had asked for. Peggy, with feminine dissimulation, had scratched a couple of illegible letters against the after-supper dance. If Tom wanted it he could have it. If not, perhaps she would sit it out. Anyhow, she did not fear being stranded.

Presently Peggy caught sight of him talking to a grave, distinguished-looking man, with a lean brown face and hair just turning grey. She had never seen him before. He was a stranger to that part of the country. They seemed interested in each other. Later, when

Peggy sat out in one of the conservatories with the heir of the house, she caught a glimpse of Tom Brent and the stranger walking up and down on the terrace outside in the moonlight.

"Who is that gentleman?" asked Peggy.

"Oh, don't you know? That is Lord Alured Fitzwalter—the Duke of St. Edmund's younger brother. He is a great traveller. The Duke has always been in a mortal funk, afraid some lion or tiger would claw off his head. He's the heir; and if anything happened him the title would go to the branch of the family that reformed under Edward VI."

Peggy was much interested.

"And so that is Lord Alured," she said. "I thought he was in the middle of Africa somewhere."

"So he always has been. He got home last week. The mater was quite elated at securing him to-night. He's a big gun in more ways than one."

The lad laughed at his weak little jest. Peggy's eyes went after the two tall figures going up and down in the moonlight; she was wondering if Tom would remember that the supper-time was approaching.

"Odd, his taking up with Brent like that!" said young Rawdon. "Seem like old friends, don't they? The Fitzwalters are an awfully proud lot. That is why, I suppose, an American

nobody seems as good to this man as anyone else. There's nobody quite their equal, and below themselves they don't recognise any steps or stairs. By Jove, they seem to have struck up quite a friendship. I only hope that Brent won't keep the big man out there too long, or he'll get into horrible disgrace with the mater. The mater had quite other designs."

A pretty girl in a pink frock, passing by with a young man in uniform, rapped young Rawdon smartly with her fan on the smooth parting of his inane, good-natured young head.

"Don't let him chatter too much, Miss Searle," said the girl, who was his sister Muriel. "We never do; we always sit on his head when he begins. Don't sit out too long, Rawdon. Mamma doesn't look over well-pleased, though everything seems to me to be going. Doesn't it to you, Captain Stapleton? I think it a jolly ball, though it is our own."

Young Rawdon jumped up and whispered to his sister. Peggy could not help catching a phrase.

"My! Won't you be in for it to-morrow?"

"Ra-ther!" the young lady whispered back.

The couple passed on their way.

"It is nearly supper-time," said Peggy, "and I am to wait for someone under the musicians' gallery. Hadn't you better take me there?"

"Some fellows have luck," grumbled young

Rawdon, enviously. "I've to take Mrs. Vere. She's dead nuts on her supper and won't let me eat mine for looking after her. Well, come on, Miss Searle," with a sigh. "Don't tell me who the fellow is or I might kill him I'd better be looking up Mother—I mean, Mrs.—Vere. The mater is not in a humour to be trifled with."

He left Peggy in the quiet place appointed. It had been fitted up like a little withdrawing room, with screens and tapestries, and all manner of comfortable chairs.

Young Rawdon found her a chair, and hastily left her. Only then did she become aware that the dimly lit space held two other occupants beside herself. They were Sir Oswald St. Denis and Mrs. Giggs, who had been dancing together all the evening. Sir Oswald had not allowed the lady to dance with any one but himself, and he had not felt the remotest hankering after the card room, where the Duke of Wells, and Lord Egdon, and others, little interested in dancing, enjoyed themselves in their own way.

Peggy had come across the couple several times during the evening. Sir Oswald had always looked the other way, and Mrs. Giggs had made her the coldest of inclinations. Poor Peggy! She had a wild impulse to fly after young Rawdon; but the last glimpse of his coat-tails had already disappeared.

"A very pleasant ball," said Mrs. Giggs, who could not be, as she put it, absolutely inhuman, even though Peggy was a horrid, mercenary little minx.

"Very," assented Peggy, with her eyes on the roses of her shoes. Without looking, she knew that Sir Oswald was staring straight before him—Sir Oswald, who had always been so good to her, and had never forgotten birthdays and Christmases ever since she had been little—Sir Oswald, papa's dear friend!

The pain of it brought a sudden rush of hot tears into Peggy's eyes. How unjust their disapproval was! They might have known, might have guessed; and, of course, her lips were sealed for ever. Ah! what must Hilary be thinking of her, his old childish companion and friend-sweetheart of later years! And, of course, she could never, never speak.

There was a sudden low thunder of the supper-gong, increasing till it grew to a clamour. She knew without looking that Sir Oswald rose and gave his arm to Mrs. Giggs. The lady's pink frock swept her shoes as they passed out, without a word, a glance at her, they who had been her friends all her life. She could hardly lift her eyes to look after them. What a cruel chance it was that had exposed her to such mortification!

The velvet curtain which hid the entrance



to the little room was lifted, and Tom Brent came in.

"I hope you haven't been waiting," he began.

He looked sharply at Peggy's averted cheek.

"I can't go just yet," she was able to say. Then the white velvet of her young breast rose and fell stormily. She could say no more; but the tears began to chase each other down her face.

"All right," said Tom Brent. "Our table will be kept for us. Why, what is the matter, little Peggy? Forgive me for asking, but I'd rather be shot than see a woman—and you—cry."

He did not guess how much tenderness had crept into his voice.

Peggy cried on silently. He sat beside her, saying nothing; only now and again he touched a soft fold of her frock, and was thrilled by the contact. Once or twice people looked in. He lifted Peggy's big fan and held it between her and curious eyes. Seeing the place occupied, the intruders retired again.

Presently even the laggards had gone in to supper. The ball-room was deserted. Peggy's tears dried up as suddenly as they had come. She mopped her eyes with a little film of a handkerchief, and then sat with her eyes on her lap, very much ashamed of having cried before Tom Brent, yet oddly comforted by his kind neighbourhood.

Tom said no more on the subject of her tears.

He had met Sir Oswald and Mrs. Giggs as he came for Peggy, and could make a shrewd guess as to what had happened. Poor Peggy! He wished he had been there sooner, so that he might have averted her mortification. If he could only have told her that he believed in her and trusted her honesty; despite her inexplicable choice of the loud young bounder he remembered to have met at the Rectory, rather than Hilary St. Denis, a charming fellow in whom blood showed as it did in the Duke of Wells' young race-horses!

"I have never thanked you for these," said Peggy without looking at him, indicating the shower of blush roses which hung at her girdle.

"You have worn them," he said, simply.

Then he offered his arm. They entered the supper-room by a door quite close to the table Tom had secured. Perhaps no one noticed their late entry except the Duchess of Wells, who was at the principal table close by.

Her usually cold and severe eye wore now a more amiable aspect. She smiled to herself as though she thought on something pleasant. Lady Margaret for once was not under the parental wing. After she had taken her seat and sipped at the glass of champagne which Tom Brent had placed beside her, Peggy looked about for Lady Margaret.

Why, that surely was her meek brown head,



so close that Peggy could almost have touched it. Peggy could see her profile lifted with uncommon animation towards the gentleman who sat beside her.

It was Lord Alured Fitzwalter; and he seemed as pleased with his companion as she was with him.

CHAPTER XXI

ROSES

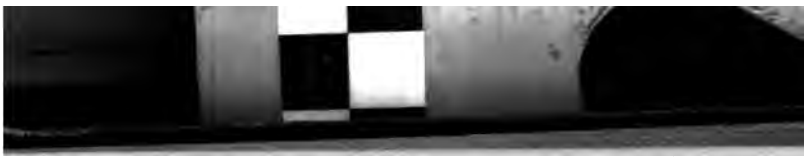
PEGGY had been disingenuous over her roses.

When the two boxes had come, both, by a curious little coincidence, from the same Regent Street shop, both with an accompanying message, her mother had watched her undo the wrappings with a wistful gleam in her own eyes.

The first had revealed a shower bouquet of stephanotis, gardenias, tuberoses, and orchids—Fred's expensive taste Peggy assured herself at once. She pushed it away from her so quietly that her mother did not notice the gesture. They smelt like death, she thought; but she kept the look of distaste from her face, which would have grieved her mother's heart.

She opened the second box with hands that lingered over their task. When she had taken off the wrappings she held it towards her mother.

"How lovely!" said Mrs. Searle. "Who would have credited Fred with so much taste? And how generous of the dear boy! You see, Peggy, he knew your gown was to be white; yet he remembered your favourite colour. Which shall you wear?"



"The roses, of course," said Peggy, shortly.

"And some of the lovely orchids?"

"No," replied Peggy. "They would spoil my roses."

She spent the morning dismembering Fred's bouquet, to fill her mother's vases, with a curious sense of satisfaction in the task.

The roses were like Peggy herself—opening roses, every one. Peggy never doubted the sender, which was an odd thing enough seeing that little had passed between her and the new master of Oriels, except that quiet glance of his which assured the girl under everybody's disapproval that he at least believed in her. After all, it was a natural and permissible attention, seeing that he was to be her escort to the ball.

When she had arranged Fred's flowers she took the great box with the roses away to her own room, where her white frock was already laid out on her bed in preparation for the evening.

Then, sitting down, she gave herself up to the contemplation of them. No gift had ever given her so much pleasure before, not even Hilary's ring, which was back again in its original owner's possession. Not the jewels with which Fred had been quick to endow her. They were fine enough to gladden any girl's heart—the string of pearls, the diamond-mounted watch, the pink pearl and diamond ring. But not so

with Peggy. Even for her mother's sake she would not wear Fred's jewels. "Not yet, not yet," she had said; and her father, with finer intuitions than Mrs. Searle possessed, or perhaps a more perfect understanding of Peggy, supported her in this matter.

"It is all a mystery to me, Alice," he said, "though I used to think I could read Peggy like a book. Now she is darker than night to me. But yet I can read that she does not care to put off one man's jewels and put on another's with the rapidity of a lightning change artiste. My little girl is too modest for that, if she has, for some inexplicable reason, played the jilt."

Cuthbert Searle went about with a sore heart those days; and it was a cruel ingredient in Peggy's cup of suffering to know that her father disapproved and wondered.

He had spoken directly to Peggy once on the subject, taking her aside and asking her if she was quite sure of herself in giving up Hilary for Fred Grace.

"Quite, quite sure," answered Peggy, with an obstinate mouth and averted eyes.

There was therefore nothing to be done with Peggy; and Mr. Searle sighed often as he found that there was a wall of reticence growing up between his little girl and himself.

In his fastidious heart he was greatly disappointed over Peggy's choice. That she should



prefer that exaggerated product of the bourgeoisie, Fred Grace, to handsome, graceful, well-bred Hilary St. Denis, with his old proud traditions, was almost shocking to the Rector. Were girls like that then? And was Peggy, whom he had fondly fancied his own image, like other girls in this unfastidious dulness where a choice of lovers was concerned?

It was Minnie's case over again, and worse than Minnie's, since he had credited Peggy with intellect and refinement far beyond what Minnie had possessed, even in the days before she had become "disgraced," as he had said in his own young, intolerant days. Was it possible Peggy would ever become like Minnie, her horizon bounded by the Grace limitations, bringing young Graces into the world to tread in their father's prosperous footsteps, and lavishing delight on them as though they were phœnixes instead of common clay? The thought made Mr. Searle gnash his teeth. He was a simple man, and at the mercy of his feminine belongings. There were times when it came to his mind that there must be some reason for Peggy's choice unknown to him. Why, after all those years, should she bow her knee to the Graces, as his wife had done, since his perpetual poverty threw into brilliant contrast the gold of which the Graces were made? These were the times when he raged at his

own helplessness. There were times again when he murmured to himself, "Souvent femme varie," and resolved to trouble no more in the matter; but that was a resolution more easily made than kept.

Fred had not been a hasty lover, in the sense of presenting himself before his fiancée. The engagement had been made prosaically by letter. Fred had had a hint from his aunt, and had immediately written, assuring Peggy in his fine clerkly handwriting that he had never met a girl who was a patch on her, suggesting that she must always have known the state of his feelings towards her, and finally asking her if she would become engaged to him.

Peggy had swallowed something in her throat as she read the letter. Tears of indignation smarted in her eyes because Fred Grace had so cavalierly taken it for granted that she was free for him. In the old days she had worn Hilary's ring persistently in Fred's full gaze. In older days yet she had flaunted to Fred her greater faith in Hilary, her dependence on him, and her admiration for him. That had been when Peggy's hair hung down her back in a dull flaxen mane and her skirts were no longer than her ankles. Those were the days when Fred had been a lumpish, conceited boy—easily sullen, unready in courtesy, the very antithesis of Hilary, whom tradition and



breeding and King Henry VI.'s ancient foundation had made a young fine gentleman.

It was unreasonable of Peggy to hate Fred because he had not known of that tie between her and Hilary in later years. It was unreasonable to resent Fred's new air of man of business and head of the house—at least presumptively.

"It's no end of a nuisance," he wrote, "that the pater should crock up just now, leaving so much responsibility on my shoulders that I cannot thank you in person for your consent to my wishes. He doesn't seem to make much progress; but however things are with him I shall present myself at the Rectory in the week following Christmas. I am tremendously in demand these days, and I can see old Danby doesn't half like it. One of these days I shall make Grace & Danby spin a little faster, although it has done very well in its slow-coach way."

Peggy resented the tone of the letter on Uncle Joe's account, for she had learned with her father to value the sterling side of the great merchant's character, which was too simple and direct to be underbred. If Fred were only like his father, she thought, he would be more tolerable, even with what must be, in Fred's case, the disadvantage of his youth.

Well, she could wait patiently enough for Fred's coming. So suddenly the simple threads

of her young life had knotted themselves into this tangle that she had yet scarcely time to perceive whither this one or that one was leading her. Just one thing she held on to in all the maze. The heaviest cloud of trouble had seemed to swim away from her mother's head.

Already clear to Peggy's eyes, the long, painful-looking back had straightened itself. The figure no longer went as though bent to earth by a burden. The eyes had lost their scared look. The hollows where the flesh had wasted began to fill in.

There were times when Peggy could hardly feel the magnitude of her sacrifice for beholding the results—times when, kneeling by her bed, she could only weep tears of gratitude that so much was given to her to do. With the reckless generosity of youth that has so much of life to give away, she asked herself at such times of what importance was it that for a few years she should be unhappy—she allotted herself a short span at such moments—seeing that she was saving her mother's life, perhaps even more than that, her father's heart. For Peggy never doubted that it would break Cuthbert Searle's proud heart if he discovered that flaw in his wife's conscience.

Mrs. Searle was now in the doctor's hands. It was part of her economy before to conceal any bodily ills from which she might suffer, so



as to avoid the expense of medical attendance. Now Peggy would have in the best of aid money could buy in that remote part of the world.

"Hush!" she said, placing a finger on her mother's lip when old habit asserted itself in Mrs. Searle's protest. "You are going to have a rich daughter, you know. Presently we shall put in a locum tenens for papa, and I will carry you both off to the South."

"When, Peggy, when?" breathed Mrs. Searle in a thirsty rapture of anticipation.

"Soon," said Peggy, who had had the child's joy for a second at the thought of the countries she had never seen. Then a cloud fell over her joy.

"I suppose Fred would not let us go by ourselves," she said, with wistful gaiety.

Despite her preoccupation in her own troubles Mrs. Searle was not without remorse over her daughter. The nervous unrest which the doctor spoke of as the obstacle to her complete restoration to health made her wakeful of nights. When she could not sleep she could not lie a-bed. Her husband usually slept the sleep of the man at peace with all the world and one much out of doors.

Waking one night he missed his wife, and, rising in some alarm to seek her, he found her by the glimmer of her candle in the room that had been Peggy's nursery. She had taken

from their locked drawers Peggy's little garments of long ago, and was sitting with some of them in her lap, looking at them as one looks at the garments of a dead child.

With one look to assure himself that she was warmly clad he went away noiselessly and left her to the pangs and sweetness of her motherhood. These were things that he felt were best left untouched, even by the most tender and reverential hands.

He grew accustomed to waking and seeing her place vacant at night, and was less disturbed by it after a time, since the absences were not for long, and she seemed to sleep better after them. She was ill and a woman; and she had to be humoured as something tender and perdurable.

One night Peggy had been carried off by Amelia Brent for the night. Peggy had lost all her prejudices now against Amelia, and seemed to cling gratefully to her friendship.

That night Mrs. Searle's absence from her own room lasted long enough to perturb her husband, who rose at last and went in search of her.

He found her asleep in Peggy's little white bower of a room—so spotless, so poor, that the Lady Poverty herself might have dwelt there. Everywhere were the trifles with which a girl likes to adorn her nest. The room had the unmistakable air which is never worn by the room of an older woman.



The gray dawn was in the room: it was widening slowly as faint streaks of crimson rose in the East. The maids in the house were already astir. Lately Peggy had insisted on the addition of a cook to the establishment.

Cuthbert Searle sat with his hands clasped over his knees, watching the red winter dawn spread over all the heaven.

His wife slept soundly and sweetly. Her face was turned toward him as she lay, and she was smiling in her sleep. Her age seemed to have fallen away from her as quickly as it had overtaken her.

Peggy's desk lay open at the table by his elbow. Glancing casually at it Mr. Searle was aware of a smell of roses, and noticed a box full of dead roses open on the open desk. Being a man, he did not wonder what association Peggy had with the roses. He would have thought doubtless that their sweetness was enough reason to keep them.

He let his wife sleep on undisturbed till near breakfast time. When she came downstairs he saw that her sleep had done her good, for she looked unusually bright and happy.

The brightness continued too, and was accompanied by improved appetite and steadier nerves. The doctor was greatly pleased at his next visit to his patient. But Cuthbert Searle, while he devoutly thanked the Giver of all good things,

never dreamt of associating the improved state of affairs with that boxful of withered roses, more precious to his sick wife than cassia and sandalwood and ambergris.

Certainly after he had kept vigil by her in that stormy dawn she had no more wakeful nights, but tasted night after night the deep quiet sleep of convalescence.



CHAPTER XXII

POLEMICS

THERE was a terrible to-do at Egrets, the Duke of Wells' place, and rumours of the cause had reached the housekeeper's room and servants' hall, and passed beyond to the stable yard and the gardens, and were being widely disseminated over the placid countryside.

The Duke had been attending the Agricultural Show in the chief county town, twenty miles away, and had put up at the County Club, where he always enjoyed himself hugely with gentlemen of like mind to himself, and so was in no hurry to return home.

The first sight of his coachman's portentous face at the railway station told the Duke something had gone wrong, but after the first question and the man's well-trained assurance that everything was as it ought to be his Grace curbed his impatience.

"There's something up," he said to himself as he took the ribbons from Ellis's hands, "and Ellis knows it, and is not supposed to know it. I wish I'd stayed at the Club. But anyhow, if

Theodora is to die of it I'll have a few men over next week to play Bridge with me."

The Duke had been bitten by the rage for the fashionable game, and had only just realised how dull his life had been all these years under Theodora's rigidly evangelical rule. The Duchess would as soon have seen the devil in person at Egrets as a pack of cards. But the Duke had assured himself that he wasn't going to be browbeaten. If Theodora didn't like it she could lump it; and much more to the same effect, which the Duchess would have thought vulgar as well as wicked.

He went straight to the library on returning home, and was seated there opening his letters when the Duchess's maid came in with a message that her Grace would like to see him in her workroom.

"I thought as much," he muttered to himself. "Theodora's in one of her tantrums and entrenched behind her bales of red flannel. What mare's nest has been unearthed now? I can see it in all their faces. I hope she hasn't been worrying Meg."

Of late the Duke had taken his daughter under his protection in a rather touching way. He had been responsible for her fine feathers at Lady Egdon's ball, where everyone had admired the heavy white silk that had swathed her really handsome figure and had brought out, as



masses of white will, the peace of her eyes, and the pure serenity of her colourless face.

He had—her Grace would have had a fit if she had known it—approached Mrs. Giggs with the most elephantine diplomacy on the subject of a dressmaker for Lady Margaret. The little woman had given him the information he needed in the most impersonal way, as though it could not possibly be for anyone either of them knew. Then he had carried Lady Margaret off to London for a few days and had placed her in the hands of Madame Lamode, of Sackville Street, who turned her out in time a great number of very beautiful garments, each absolutely necessary, she assured their future wearer, whose taste in clothes was that of a nun,

Since the Duke had asserted himself to the extent of encroaching on her Grace's feminine preserves, he had become, in his wife's opinion, objectionably meddlesome. He had set his face from the beginning against the fine match she had proposed for Lady Margaret, and had supported the girl in her refusal to have anything to say to one of the richest commoners in England. However, now, perhaps, Plantagenet would repent his folly, the Duchess thought, with some satisfaction.

She received him in her sewing-room, with its familiar oily smell of new flannels. She had

her handkerchief pressed against her eyes, as she sat with one foot on the fender. There was no sign of Lady Margaret.

"Where's Meg?" asked the Duke, as he pulled down a window, and let the keen frosty air into the room. "It's no wonder you've spoilt her complexion, keeping her shut up in this grease-bag."

The Duke was in a very bad humour apparently,

"Oh, Plantagenet," said the Duchess, too overcome to take up his challenge, "something dreadful has happened. I've locked that wicked girl in her room, where she ought to be kept for the rest of her life."

"Stuff and nonsense," said the Duke. "You can't keep a young woman locked up like that, ma'am. You'd have the police after you. What has Meg been doing? Walking out with a young man, eh?"

If Mrs. Giggs, who had taken a violent fancy to the Duke since he had consulted her over Lady Margaret's dressmaker, had been present and had seen the sudden grayness that spread over his florid tints, despite his brave words, she would have understood and sympathised better than his wife.

"You will see now, perhaps," went on the Duchess, "the wrong you did in exciting Margaret to rebellion against me."



"What has Meg done? Can't you speak, ma'am?" the Duke said, making a fierce stride towards his wife.

His violence hurried her Grace, who had meant to unfurl her story by slow degrees.

"Margaret is on the eve of becoming a Papist," she said.

"A Papist!" the Duke looked staggered. "Who's been telling you such a cock-and-bull story?"

"Mr. Babcock. It seems that Margaret has been for some months in the habit of attending the services at the Duke of St. Edmunds' chapel. That explains her early morning and late afternoon walks. Someone who had seen her and recognised her as she left the chapel brought the news to Mr. Babcock. He had her watched afterwards, and as soon as he was sure about it he came and told me."

"He did, did he?" shouted the Duke, whose cheeks had suddenly become deep purple. "So Babcock had Meg watched off his own bat, and brought the tale to you! Did you, ma'am, lift up your boot and kick Babcock out of the house?"

"Plantagenet!" cried her Grace.

"Well, then, it's what I'll do, even if I'm summoned for assault over it. And so you locked up Meg on this fellow's evidence? Let me see Meg. What does she say for herself?"

"She does not deny it. With shameless effrontery she told me that she was about to tell us herself, since there was a difficulty about her joining the Romanist Church while we were in the dark."

"Poor Meg!" said the Duke, a wonderful softening coming over his homely farmer's face.

"You needn't pity her," cried the Duchess, with acrimony. She had put away her handkerchief now, forgetting the pretended necessity for its use. "She had the insolence to tell me that as soon as we had consented to her 'reception,' as she called it, she would be the happiest girl in the world."

"Let's have her down," answered the Duke. "No; go yourself, Theodora! I won't have a servant unlock the door upon my daughter. Stay, give me the key. I'll see Meg myself."

Her Grace fumbled in the bottom of a tremendous pocket of holland, which she wore habitually round her waist, while the Duke watched her impatiently.

"It's all that wretched Mr. Searle," her Grace grumbled as she made many futile dives. "I always felt he was leading us astray; but little I thought the first victim would be my own daughter."

"Searle's an honest man and a gentleman," answered the Duke, irritably. "I never hear his sermons myself, because I never could listen



to a sermon. I begin to think of the cattle and the crops, and then I fall asleep. But good judges have told me that he's over all our heads, much too good for us, and deserves to be a bishop, only he's too unworldly-minded. Meg didn't learn Papistry from him. Why, he's not even High."

"No, he's only unorthodox," answered her Grace, producing the key. "But then his friendship with that monk—his frequent statements, which I have heard with horror, that we all belong to a sort of universal Church. That excellent Mr. Babcock says——"

"Confound Mr. Babcock!" said the Duke, with the key in his hand. "Of course, we're all equal in the sight of Heaven, and Searle would be an ass and a snob if he preached anything else. As for Babcock, if I am to take my doctrine from the son of the man that shod my father's horses—"

He was half-way up the stairs as he shouted back the last sentence, which made the footman passing through the hall send a delighted wink to the stately butler.

He unlocked the door violently as though he would have shaken it down. For the first time, with the key in the lock, he seemed to recognise the indignity that had been offered to his daughter, and the realisation made him furious. But as soon as the door was opened

he closed it quickly and gently behind him. He would have no eavesdroppers on the stairs listening to the interview between himself and his girl.

Lady Margaret was standing by a table in one of the windows when he entered. She wore a startled look, and her hand was on the pages of a book which she had been reading as though she clung to it for help. It was an illuminated Book of Hours, one of the treasures of the house.

A sense of the loneliness of the figure in the long, lofty, austere room made itself felt through the father's somewhat dull consciousness. There was something wrong with the room, he thought; no fal-lals, no daintinesses, no comfortable soft chairs. He remembered the rooms of his sister, Lady Adeliza, who had died in girlhood, suddenly; he had not thought of those rooms for a quarter of a century. But now by the light of their memory this room was a prison.

"Meg!" he said, taking a step or two forward.

"Father!" she cried, a sudden light breaking over her spiritual face.

He put an arm about her fondly and clumsily as they met in the middle of the room.

"What's all this about, Meg?" he asked. "Your mother tells me that you want to be a Papist. What bee have you got in your bonnet, my girl?"

"It is quite true," replied Lady Margaret, with averted face. "I haven't come to a



decision lightly, father. I knew what it would mean to you and my mother. I have been thinking about it for years. I have read everything I could get on the subject. It seems to me the only way. I'm a woman now, and not a thoughtless child."

"And your own mistress, eh, Meg?"

The Duke, sitting down opposite his daughter, took off his hat, which he had been wearing unconsciously. It was a top hat of a rather ancient fashion, with the nap discoloured by wind and weather, and going in many directions. Out of the crown he produced a red silk pocket handkerchief and wiped his forehead.

"Subject to you, father, and my mother in all lawful things," answered Lady Margaret, with her faint, ethereal smile.

"Obedience is very good, my girl," he said, "but I'm hanged if I don't believe that you've sometimes been too obedient. How old are you now, Meg? Twenty-five, eh?"

"I shall be twenty-seven next June."

"Old enough to know your own mind, Meg. There, my girl. I won't say I'm glad about it. It's a little bit of a—a blow, you know. Still, we were all Papists once. You must go your own way, my girl. I'll put no hindrance to it."

Lady Margaret came to his side and kissed his rough old face.

"Dear father!" she whispered below her breath. "Dearest father!"

"Yes, yes," said the Duke, hastily. "We always understood each other, didn't we, Meg, from the time you were a little baby? How is that fine French maid of yours getting on? Making you lots of pretty things, eh? Your room looks cold, Meg. And no fire, my girl. Tut! tut! this won't do. What are those lazy servants about? Come along, Meg, down to your mother."

"What will she say? She was dreadfully angry with me."

His daughter's hand shook as it clung to his arm.

"Tut! tut! what can she say? I'm the head of the house. None of us were ever ruled by our womenkind. I'm too easy-going, too easy-going. The servants haven't enough to do. I'm going to have a party next week, Meg. Pheasant-shooting all day and Bridge after dinner. Did you ever hear of Bridge, Meg?"

An odd gleam of humour shot into Lady Margaret's unworldly eyes.

"Father Anselm plays it," she answered quietly.

"Ah, then, we'll have him over. That's one thing about the monks. There are no Babcocks, no killjoys among them."

"Poor Mamma!"

"Ay, she won't like it. Never mind. A man must be master in his own house. By the way, your mother blames Searle, Meg, for your Romanizing."



"Perhaps he was the signpost at the beginning. But I have gone so much further than he could have anticipated."

They were going towards the door, hand in hand, when suddenly the Duke pulled up and looked at his daughter in a scared way.

"You won't be wanting to pop into a nunnery, Meg? I remember Carruthers' daughter. She went out on Chinese missions, and left her poor father with no one to look after him in his old age. You wouldn't do such a dreadful thing, Meg?"

A great wave of rose-colour suddenly swept over Lady Margaret's face, and her lashes fell over her eyes.

"There is no danger of my being a nun," she answered. "I have no call that way at all, father, none at all.

"If I hadn't known Meg as I do," said the Duke to himself afterwards, "I'd have sworn she was a girl in love."



CHAPTER XXIII

A PLOTTER

MRS. GIGGS and the Brents were among the party at Egrets, where life went faster than the old house could have believed possible a month ago.

The Duchess had capitulated fairly and squarely. She wore the look of a Christian martyr, and she took her bed-chamber candlestick every night at ten, and left the party to play Bridge into the small hours, but made no more outward protest against the World, which had been suddenly let loose upon her.

She had deserted Wivenham Church, and had caused almost a scandal in that conservative place by attending Mr. Babcock's services; but the Duke, though he objected very strongly in his heart of hearts to his Duchess sitting under Babcock, felt bound to let her go her own way with no more than a protest.

"The Pierponts were always Church people, as became their station, Theodora," he said. "Still, if you like Babcock's way! Smacks too much of the blacksmith's son to my way of



thinking. Showers of sparks and plenty of hammering—and a strong smell of burning, eh?"

"The Pierponts were always Church people," repeated her Grace, scorning to answer the latter part of the speech. "Still, with this scandal of our daughter, Plantagenet! And a Popish monk in our midst!"

"A jolly good fellow," replied the Duke. "You wouldn't be comparing Anselm with Babcock, Theodora? He's the best Bridge player we've got; and every house in the country'll be running after him after this. Besides, Margaret has taken a well-bred religion. Look at St. Edmunds! I'm a mushroom of yesterday beside St. Edmunds."

"I wish the Duke lived in some other county," answered her Grace. "His name leads away the ignorant."

Mrs. Giggs was sitting with her silk-slippered feet on the fender of Amelia's room at about 2.30 a.m, of a fine frosty morning. Her late hours and gambling did not seem to have had the smallest effect on her clear, wholesome, brown complexion and bright eyes. Her pink silk dressing-gown became her delightfully with its little fussy frills and cascades of lace.

They were talking of their hosts.

"What a pity," said Amelia, "that the Duchess could not marry Mr. Babcock. They were made for each other."

"But Mrs. Babcock and her nine daughters? And the Duke?" suggested Mrs. Giggs.

"Oh, I'd marry the Duke. I think he's just lovely," answered Amelia.

"I think I'd marry him myself, if there were no Oswald. He's so good to his daughter. I've loved him ever since he took me into his confidence about her frocks. I wonder why he ever married that Gorgon of a woman!"

"Lady Margaret looks too happy for anything," replied Amelia. "She makes us all seem worldlings. Still, she's very pleasant and doesn't make a fuss about our little ways. To be sure, the priest behaves like any of us."

"I wonder whether he's just a good fellow," asked Mrs. Giggs, thoughtfully, "or whether it's a sort of apostolate of the Bridge table. I believe he'll draw in a lot of us. I distrust his big rosy face and blue Irish eyes. Only Mr. Searle's a dear and suits me; I wouldn't feel myself safe with Father Anselm."

"Such a man of the world, and so delightful a sense of humour!" sighed Amelia, "He'd almost make a nun of me."

"Only for Hilary!"

Amelia blushed brightly.

"As though I can't comfort a poor boy who has just been thrown over without such suggestions, Bee."

"Hilary's a fraud. He's longing to forgive Peggy and be friends with her again."



"He can't forgive her choice," said Amelia.

"Ah, is that why you want her to change it?"

Amelia stared at Mrs. Giggs and then smiled.

"Why should I want her to change it, Bee?"

"Well, perhaps to please Hilary."

Miss Brent looked into the heart of the glowing coal.

"You're too clever for anything, Bee. Why shouldn't I want to be good to little Peggy, who touches me, before she's carried out of our ken for ever?"

"Why not, indeed? I'm sorry for Peggy myself now. I was angry with her at first, illogically, for I always wanted her to throw over Hilary—at least, I have wanted it for some time back. But that night at the ball, I felt so sorry for her. And I've seen her since. She doesn't look like a happy engaged girl."

"Very unlike you. You have only to look in the glass. But Peggy—no, she doesn't look happy. She's changed dreadfully since we came to Oriels. She was a high-spirited, shy, pretty child then. She's become a woman all of a sudden, and not a happy one. She's not pretty any longer, Bee; have you noticed?"

"I haven't seen her for some time," replied Mrs. Giggs, in a conscience-stricken voice. "You see, Oswald keeps so angry with her. Mrs. Searle looks well enough. I caught a glimpse of her last Sunday."

"She—oh, yes, she looks all right," answered Amelia, indifferently. "I don't care how she looks. Peggy's roses are all withering. The bridegroom will only have pot-pourri."

"It would be too good for the little wretch by all accounts. What does your brother think of the change in her?"

"Tom's more bewitched than ever. He can't see that she's not so pretty. If she goes on losing her pinkness, as she is doing every day, she'll soon be ordinary. Of course, she has a big mouth and a hopeless nose. One never saw it in the old days for the pinkness of her cheeks and the blueness of her eyes and the little milky teeth. It is only lately that it has been borne in upon me."

"But your brother doesn't see it in your way?"

"Tom says she's prettier than ever."

"You are a most disinterested sister, Amelia."

Miss Brent looked at her friend scrutinisingly, Then she flung her hands wide.

"I may as well give myself away to you, Bee, since you're my friend, though you'll tell Sir Oswald. No; don't say you won't! Don't make any kind of protest! Engaged and married people always lose their sense of honour. I mean women do. Yes, it's for Tom. I didn't come over to this old Europe of yours and put my poor Tom in the way of that young siren, Peggy, to have her destroy all his happiness



for ever. I am playing a game, Bee, that Tom would never play himself. He is so strait-laced. He might be descended from the Pilgrim Fathers rather than from the great old Fitzgeralds, and from Lancashire mill hands who couldn't be supposed to have any sense of honour at all."

"It's a risky kind of game to play, since by all accounts Peggy is to marry her cousin early in the New Year."

"She'll never marry him if I can help it," answered Amelia, with a gesture of snapping her fingers. "If you could know how good Tom has been to me!"

"I can see he's a perfectly ideal brother. That is why I am so edified at your readiness to give him to someone else. Unless indeed you don't mean to play second-fiddle long?"

"There are too many lovely young fellows in the world for that," said Amelia, gaily. "But now, Bee, though I won't accept your promise never to tell Sir Oswald, for I know you wouldn't keep it, I want you to keep the secret for a while—till I win the game or lose it."

"You unscrupulous girl!"

"I've just got to be unscrupulous, for Tom, dear old fellow, will do nothing. I've thrown them together as much as I possibly could, lately. But Tom's a perfect St. Anthony. When it's a matter of what men call honour, you couldn't move him. It must be the Fitzgeralds."

"It isn't only engaged and married women who are deficient in a sense of honour?" said Mrs. Giggs, smiling.

"My! No. In a matter of plain common-sense like this, women don't go after a lot of chimerae." Amelia had not forgotten her High School days. "They just go straight forward. Here is my poor old Tom head over ears in love with Peggy, and here is Peggy going to marry a nasty little bounder and break her heart over it for some inexplicable reason. And I think Peggy likes Tom, or somebody, or why need she mind so much? And who could it be but Tom since it wasn't Hilary? I'm going to do my level best for the pair of them."

"And the young gentleman from Streatham?"

"Can marry one of his own kind," answered Amelia, scornfully. "He's not in love with Peggy; he's in love with himself. Only to his credit be it said that he saw Peggy was something unique in her way. Why, I could make him head over ears in love with me if I tried."

"I've no doubt you could. But what good would that do?"

"That's it," replied Amelia thoughtfully. "I've no use for the young gentleman just at present."

"You're a hard-hearted wretch! But what would Tom say if he knew of your machinations?"

"He would be mad with me. I can't imagine myself being mad with anyone who should help



me towards the person I loved. But Tom would be downright mad. Of course he will never know."

"I prophesy that your machinations will come to nothing."

Amelia looked at her with an inscrutable air.

"You don't know how far I am prepared to go," she answered.

"For goodness' sake, Amelia, don't go too far," said her friend, in half-serious alarm. "You know people have old-fashioned ideas here, ideas like your brother's, of honour and things of that sort. All men who are gentlemen have. There is Hilary—"

Amelia blushed again.

"I am going to let Hilary speak as soon as I have settled this matter about Peggy," she replied. "I can't tell you what a business it has been keeping him back. As soon as Peggy's perfectly happy I'll let him go."

Mrs. Giggs laughed delightedly.

"I thought there was something going on all the time, you deceitful girl," she said. "But why so much consideration for Peggy? It was she who threw over Hilary, and not Hilary who threw over her."

"There was something behind it. I want to see Peggy happy but I want to see Tom happy too. I used to tell him that we'd stay together all our days. He didn't want to settle down here, in this old country of yours. That

was my doing, He'd be twice as happy in a dusty coat, with a book in his hand, wandering in and out of the old churches and picture galleries of Europe, or climbing mountains or something. I'm not sure he doesn't hanker a little bit after Brent's. I never want to see Brent's again. All that is too new. But it would be too mean to leave Tom to an old bachelor existence, after six months or so of playing the attached spinster sister."

"So you are playing for your own hand? You would instal Peggy at Oriels in your place?"

Amelia looked at her with an indescribable roguishness.

"Tom wants to see the world," she answered. "Why should he not show it to Peggy as well? He doesn't care about Oriels. I should buy him out, I think."

"You could do that?" cried her startled and delighted listener.

"Poppa believed in making his daughter an heiress," replied Amelia. "I don't think Tom would mind. You know, I always wanted to give Oriels back to Hilary."

"It's too much for a wife to give her husband," said Mrs. Giggs, forgetting how handsomely she was going to endow Sir Oswald.

"Do you know, I think you're simply antediluvian in your ideas!" answered Amelia.



CHAPTER XXIV

THE DISAPPEARANCE

CHRISTMAS was over and done with, and Fred was at Wivenham Rectory.

His father still dragged along through a tedious illness, which left the result in doubt. Joe Grace had never been a strong man, and was no longer a young one; and though the more painful part of the illness was over, recovery was slow. The doctors talked of the South of Europe during the months of the east wind in England. They feared consumption. That was Fred's news.

"So I want Peggy to settle the day as soon as possible, Aunt Alice," he said, "in order that we may have our month in Paris, or anywhere else Peggy likes, before it is necessary for the pater to start. The mater goes with him, of course. He is very keen about my marriage, and will give me pretty full powers in his absence. Danby won't like it, but Danby will just have to lump it."

There had been an unfortunate mistake about meeting Fred. Wivenham was midway

between two stations—to one or other of which travellers came as it suited their train. Fred had come in at Goshawk. Peggy had driven to meet him at Nettleton. So Fred had to leave his luggage and walk by the field-path, and arrived somewhat offended. He was certain he had told Peggy, Goshawk.

It took all Mrs. Searle's diplomacy to smooth his ruffled feathers. She had succeeded to some extent before Peggy returned; and Mr. Searle's real concern when he came in and heard of the unfortunate accident helped to restore Fred to good-humour.

"You're here first anyhow, my lad," he said. "Peggy and the donkey have lost the race."

"I shouldn't have complained of the slowness, in the circumstances," replied Fred, with a return to his old form, which did not altogether please the Rector.

He went out, leaving his wife and her nephew together by the drawing-room fire, awaiting Peggy's return and the luncheon-bell. Luncheon had been timed to suit the hour of the traveller's probable arrival; but Fred by striking across country had put out those calculations.

Yes; Mrs. Searle thought that Peggy might be ready within the month. Her trousseau was in hand. Both Peggy and her father would, she was sure, see the reasonableness of Fred's desire for an early date as things were.



"As for frocks, don't you bother about those, Aunt Alice," answered Fred, basking in the warmth of the fire and the subtle incense of his aunt's flattery. "I'll buy her any amount in Paris. You haven't got too much money to spare, I know. By the way, there's a little matter of a few thou. between Uncle Cuthbert and Grace's. Peggy shall have the I.O.U.'s to give back to him on her wedding morning."

Mrs. Searle turned red and pale and panted a little. Despite the raw January day, drops of sweat came out on her forehead.

"That will be very handsome of you, Fred," she said. "My husband ——"

"Oh, that's all right, Aunt Alice. Grace & Danby can afford it. I don't suppose we ever thought of repayment. Anyhow we'll wipe it off the slate. Any little accommodation of that sort you want in future you must come to me for it."

"Thank you very much, Fred," panted Mrs. Searle. "You won't speak of it to my husband? He is so proud."

Fred lifted his eyebrows a little. If a man had the need to borrow money he couldn't see how he could be proud about it afterwards. However, Fred was not ill-natured.

"All right, Aunt Alice," he replied. "There need never be a word about the matter. Peggy and I will burn the things as soon as I lay hands

upon them. I haven't got them yet, but the pater means to hand them over to me for the auspicious day."

Was there anything Mrs. Searle would not have done to hasten the marriage? If only the month was over! What chances it might not hold! Supposing Joe Grace were to become worse and die! Mr. Danby, the junior partner, was not very fond of Fred, had indeed done his best to keep Fred from having any power in the firm till he was twenty-five years of age. Supposing Joe Grace were to die, and Mr. Danby to have his own way! The chances of the four weeks made Mrs. Searle sick with fear to think upon them.

Presently Peggy came in, full of contrition for the mistake that had been made. Was it possible she had not noticed that Fred had written Goshawk? After presenting her cheek for his kiss she stood nervously in the midst of the big, light room, unfastening the buttons of her long coat.

The cold light of the coldest, whitest hour of the January day was full upon her. Once again Fred was dissatisfied with Peggy's looks; yet this time she had not deliberately willed it. Her coat was home-made and ill-fitting, of a hard grey frieze which had been one of Mrs. Searle's bargains. Her cap was of the same unbecoming stuff. Her nose was a little red, her eyes watery.



An untidy wisp of hair strayed across her forehead.

Fred looked at her with positive dismay. Was this Peggy — Peggy whom he had thought worth all the fortunes which, with their possessors, were ready to be laid at his feet? In his own circle Joe Grace's son was a magnificent *parti*. It was only at Wivenham that he had ever known what it was to be insignificant, disregarded.

"I don't like that coat on Peggy," he said, turning sharply to Mrs. Searle. "Nor the cap. She oughtn't to wear them. What has she been doing to herself? She isn't the same Peggy."

The speech was rude in manner. There was none of the lover's concern, which would have softened, excused it. Peggy turned a deep, unbecoming red. She made as though she would have walked out of the room. Then she caught sight of her mother's face. There was fear in it.

"I am very sorry, Fred," she said, gently. "It is a horrid coat, but it is the warmest I have. And I am all right, thank you. Only, it is nipping cold, and Brisk"—Brisk was the donkey's most unsuitable name—"kept me a long time on the road."

Fred was mollified.

"Go and take it off, Peggy," he said. "You

must never wear it any more. We'll write to Redferns, to send down some one with coats for you to choose."

Yet after Peggy had gone away slowly, with a hanging head, the unpleasant image recurred to him. Supposing Peggy were to turn out downright plain! That beauty which depended so much on colour was, Fred feared, a fleeting thing. Supposing all Peggy's delicious colour was to take wings! Fred had been counting a good deal on the stir Peggy's appearance in Streatham Hill circles would make. If he was doing a little bit of the King Cophetua in marrying a penniless girl, he was quite conscious that in Cuthbert Searle's daughter he was gaining something which was not to be had in Streatham. Peggy's fawn-like grace, her exquisite air of innocence, her flower-like colour —supposing these things were to take wings and fly, how horribly he, Fred, would have been cheated! He never could have believed that a cold January day and ugly, ill-fitting clothes would have made such a difference with Peggy. Why, in the old days the winter cold had only made her colour redder than the rose.

How different had been Tom Brent's thoughts when, an hour before, he had met Peggy at the railway station! She had been looking cold and miserable before she had caught sight of him,



but at the first glimpse of him her cheeks had taken fire. What matter if they had not, if they had remained blue and pinched. Tom Brent had not the faintest idea of how Peggy was clad. He could not think of the dull wrappings for the lovely thing they contained. Tom would never see Peggy otherwise than as she was when he first saw her, and her beauty and freshness had captured his faithful heart.

After all, Peggy could not produce Fred's letter to verify his assertion that he had given the name of the station. Challenged to produce it, she looked scared, and finally confessed that she had torn it up. Fred's brow was blacker than a thundercloud at the confession.

The next day they were invited to Oriels—an informal invitation which included tea and dinner.

"Miss Brent was most kind about it," said Peggy. "She thought Fred might like to see the pictures. We could take Brisk, of course, and Fred might fetch over his things, so that he could dress for dinner. But I suppose—he would not care to go—in the circumstances."

She looked in an ashamed way at her mother. No one was ever so ashamed and so reluctant about lovers' circumstances as was Peggy.

"But indeed he will care to go," her mother replied, "You know he always does like to be

asked to places, and is inclined to suspect slights if he is not taken about."

Alone with her daughter, Mrs. Searle forgot to conceal her feeling about Fred, that he was a sort of rather disagreeable spoilt child who had to be conciliated for peace sake.

When the question was put to Fred Mrs. Searle proved to be right. Fred showed no alacrity indeed about going; that would hardly consist with his dignity. Still, he didn't mind if he did go; that was Fred's way of expressing an inclination.

Peggy in a white silk blouse and skirt was fine enough for informal dining, and only a little too lightly clad for the time of year for afternoon visiting. However, as Amelia called for them in her brougham on her way from lunching at Acres, and promised that they should be driven home again, Peggy's dress was not a matter for difficulties.

Amelia seemed quite taken with Fred, showed more even than her ordinary keen interest in her fellow-creatures, so that Peggy wondered.

Peggy was left to think her thoughts, silent in her dark corner in the comfortable carriage. Twilight had fallen, and Amelia's profile, inclined towards Fred in the eagerness of her conversation, glimmered white as ivory against the dark upholstering of the carriage.

Peggy listened and wondered. Usually



Amelia did most of the talking. Now she listened, with deference almost, one might have said, to Fred's vapid chatter of himself and his own narrow experiences. Whenever he seemed likely to come to a full stop, Amelia's questions, her air of listening, drew him on again. Was it really possible Amelia liked to hear such things?

It was the same when they had reached Oriels and were sitting by the fire over tea and buttered scones. Amelia kept Fred by her skirts. Peggy in the shadows smiled a faint derisive smile to herself at the thought that Amelia's conduct might have been supposed to make her jealous. Tom Brent was by her side attending to all her wants. Now and again she felt rather than saw that he looked with wonder at Amelia. Perhaps he had the same thought—that it was hardly fair to Peggy that Amelia should so entirely engross her lover. The thought made Peggy's cheeks crimson in the darkness as though she had been newly wounded.

After tea they set out to walk through the picture-gallery. The electric light had been put in there, and the place was flooded with a soft radiance. Amelia went first with Fred. The others strolled behind. Did not Peggy know the pictures as well as their owners?

Half-way the picture-gallery was divided by

an arched doorway, over which hung heavy velvet curtains. As Amelia approached these, she looked back over her shoulder and saw that Tom, with his companion, had paused before the enormous fire-place by which the gallery was warmed.

A sudden excitement came into her eyes. As though she feared that Fred would see too, she laid her hand on his arm almost like a caress.

"We have been making additions to the treasures of Oriels," she said. "I wonder now, do you know anything about illuminated manuscripts? I should so like your opinion on one my brother has recently acquired."

Fred was ready to give an opinion on anything and everything. He was rather off his head this afternoon, and various wild thoughts were sweeping through his mind, making his pulses beat and his blood tingle.

By Jove, the American girl was going it. If only he had not been so hasty about Peggy, goodness knows what might have happened! Oriels would have been a good sort of a crib for a fellow to find himself in for the rest of his days!

He was just wondering whether he might not venture to meet Amelia at least half-way when she put a magnifying glass into his hand.

"Try if you can see anything written down



there among the feathers of the angel's wing," she said. "I fancy I can read a name. I shall be with you again in a few moments."

She returned the way they had come, leaving Fred, with his thoughts in a tumult, bending over the glass-case of the manuscript. Little he cared about whether there was a name or not. He could only think of what a stunning girl Amelia was and of how she had forced the pace.

She was with him again in a second.

"Have you made it out?" she enquired with a charming eagerness.

As she bent down her hair touched his cheek, intoxicating him; but this Amelia had not intended. However, she had done enough to keep Fred happy and engrossed for the afternoon. He forgot to wonder why Peggy delayed to join them. He expressed his opinions on books and music, pictures and statuary, upon everything on which he was least fitted to judge. Amelia listened, her peacock's feather fan by her face, in the attitude that made her head exactly like that of a Florentine angel. Fred had never so thoroughly enjoyed himself in all his life.

They lingered among the treasures of the gallery till the dressing-bell sounded

"How the afternoon has flown!" said Amelia, with a little excited shriek. "And where are

those other two? Sitting talking lazily, I suppose, while we have been so instructed and amused."

They walked back the way they had come, and looked through the arched doorway. The gallery was empty.

"They have heard the dressing-bell and gone," said Amelia, turning back.

On the way downstairs they met a servant, who showed Fred to his room. Fred had almost forgotten Peggy, and dressed in an exhilarated frame of mind. He smiled at himself in the glass in a way that he could not have done if he had had the rudimentary sense of humour, and was pleased at the reflection he saw there—the flushed cheeks, the little eyes, bright with excitement, the straight hair standing somewhat on end, the small ill-growing moustache.

Amelia awaited him in the drawing-room. She had dressed rather finer than the occasion warranted, and Fred suspected she had dressed for him, but could not be sure since he did not often dine at such houses as Oriels.

The second dinner-bell sounded. Neither Peggy nor Tom Brent appeared in answer. After a little delay Amelia sent to their rooms. They were not there.

"They are in the library and have forgotten," said Amelia, sending Briggs to seek them there.



They were not in the library; they were not in the house. Amelia and Fred looked at each other with a wild surmise.

"They can't be out of doors?" asked Fred. "Is there no other place, Miss Brent?"

"I can't imagine any other," answered Amelia. "It isn't an elopement, because it is Tom."

Then Amelia went into something uncommonly like hysterics.



CHAPTER XXV

A REVELATION

"I WAS frightened out of my life," said Amelia afterwards to her confidante, Mrs. Giggs, "when I began to realise what I had done. It was all done on impulse, I assure you. I never foresaw such a thing. You see Tom had come upon a plan of this priest's hiding-hole among the old manuscripts here, and had been explaining it to me. He had only discovered the mechanism that very day. When I ran back and found they had gone up the little winding stairs—you know the hiding-hole is built out in one of those great chimney-stacks, with a chimney-pot to give it air and light—I just turned the little ring as Tom had done, and the whole back of the fireplace came gliding into its place again. At first I thought I'd just give them time to come to an understanding. Afterwards I had a suspicion that perhaps I might not be able to work the thing again; and I began to calculate how long it would take them to die of thirst while we were trying to pull down that great fireplace. It knocked



me completely over: and by the time I had recovered sufficiently to have anything done, they had been locked into the place five hours."

"And people said how very lucky it was your brother had so thoroughly explained the mechanism to you," answered Mrs. Giggs with a smile.

"Very," repeated Amelia, "since I couldn't otherwise have given them the chance of an explanation. And some kind of an explanation there has been. I could see it in both their eyes. Peggy's were swollen with crying. Do you suppose Tom, being head over heels in love with her, could resist giving her comfort? Do you, Bee?"

"I should think not," replied Mrs. Giggs. "But you are only a half-hearted conspirator, Amelia, or you wouldn't have been so frightened of possible results."

"You see I was new to it," said Amelia, pathetically. "I will be brave next time. But I do wish I knew how far the explanation went. I can't make out from Tom's face. It looks happy and miserable by turns. He has been with me for an hour this afternoon; but I couldn't get anything from him except that Peggy was very brave till just at the last when they had almost given up hope that I would remember. You see, it was a nasty little poky place to be shut up in. You couldn't stand

upright, nor sit at full length. I do pity those poor priests who had to hide there."

"Better than the rack or the *peine forte et dure*," said Mrs. Giggs.

"It would be a horribly tight fit for Father Anselm," answered Amelia, and laughed.

Amelia was sitting in her own room, drinking tea. She had kept her room all the morning, having been genuinely upset after the events of the evening before. But she was plainly recovering; and her maid had put out one of her prettiest dinner-dresses on the bed, towards which Amelia once or twice glanced with interest.

"I was sorry to have to let little Peggy go," Amelia went on, "but she was very keen about it herself. She seems afraid of the little man in some odd way; and I really kept her last night only because she was too thoroughly upset to resist me. He didn't like being packed home alone."

"You couldn't expect him to be."

"Oh, he didn't want to stay on Peggy's account. He wanted to stay on mine."

"Yours, Amelia!"

"Mine—the little wretch! It was the easiest thing in the world to carry him off from Peggy."

"I'm surprised at you, Amelia!"

Mrs. Giggs looked genuinely shocked.

'You don't suppose I really wanted him. It



was only to keep him distracted, so that those two could have their chance. Besides, I wanted to see if he was genuinely fond of Peggy. He quite satisfied me. I have no further scruples."

"Had you ever any?"

"I think I should have if he were honest about Peggy. He is only in love with himself. But—you were very good to come over to us this evening, Bee, since Tom would not hear of my going out."

"I should not have dared to tell Hilary when he arrived at Acres that you were not coming. It was an easier thing for us all to dine here. By the way, we have settled the day, Amelia. It is to be the second of February."

"Ah, I'm glad of that. I don't see why you waited at all. In your place I should have married the day after he had spoken."

"You are quite of Oswald's mind," answered Mrs. Giggs, laughing. "But the law wouldn't permit it. Then there was really a good deal to be done. Those trustees of mine, excellent men, but slow, had to have time. By the way, when are you going to let Hilary speak, Amelia?"

"Ah, how can one tell?" replied Amelia, looking from her long eyes. "When I can no longer prevent him. I do not think it will be very long."

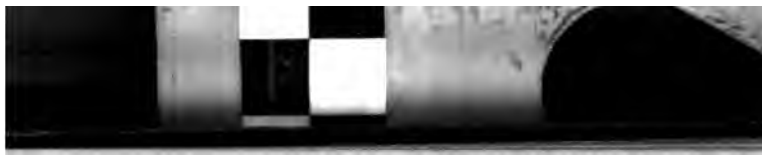
Meanwhile Fred had returned home without

Peggy the night before in a queer frame of mind. He was disposed to be sullen at being sent off alone, and to be annoyed with Peggy over the whole adventure; yet withal his vanity was still uppermost, and when he thought upon those hours in the picture gallery he was as pleased as a cat that is stroked the way of the fur.

Part of his vexation against Peggy was that the adventure had shortened his joy. If she had not got herself locked up in that ridiculous fashion, and frightened Miss Brent out of her wits and himself for the time out of his self-engrossment, the end of the visit might have been as good as the beginning. Fred was not afraid of Tom Brent. A stick of a fellow, who would never dream of using his opportunities with a pretty girl—that was Fred's mental estimate. Peggy might have talked to him all the evening and welcome, so long as Miss Brent talked to Fred. Engaged people were not supposed to label themselves, thought Fred, in his man of the world mood.

He explained Peggy's non-appearance. She and Mr. Brent had accidentally got locked into the newly discovered priest's hiding-hole, and had not been set free for some time. Peggy had been very much alarmed and upset, and Miss Brent had kept her for the night.

Mr. Searle looked grave at the story. He



did not like the adventure for his girl. But after all it was kind, serious Tom Brent. No one would suppose the thing to be anything but accidental, and the servants at Oriels were the last in the world to have vulgar thoughts or to gossip.

It was a point of view that did not seem to have occurred to Fred, or to Mrs. Searle, who only thought of smoothing away the little frown on Fred's brow.

There had been no suggestion on Amelia's part that he should come to Oriels for Peggy next day. She had promised to send her over soon after breakfast. Fred didn't see why he shouldn't have been asked to walk over to lunch and fetch Peggy. However, no such suggestion had been made; so he had perforce to be patient.

He sat with Mrs. Searle in the drawing-room after breakfast. She had easier times now than of old. Mr. Searle had made a polite suggestion that Fred should go with him when he went out to visit some of his parishioners, but Fred had declined. Somehow he and Mr. Searle never seemed quite to hit it off.

He sat watching Mrs. Searle work her sewing-machine. Now and again she smiled at him or said something to him very sweetly. Behind her sweetness she was wondering irritably why Fred couldn't read or find some way

of amusing himself, even if he wouldn't go out. The *Athenæum* and the *Spectator* were on a table by his elbow. Dwarf bookcases showing all sorts of alluring titles ran round the room. Fred never looked their way. The *Pink 'Un* or *Tit Bits* were as far as Fred ever got in the reading way.

As the morning passed and Peggy did not return, it began to be borne in on Fred that he was being treated with disrespect. The sullen look which Mrs. Searle dreaded as a slave dreads the whip of his master settled down on Fred's face, and grew heavier every moment. She watched him anxiously, plying her machine but not daring to speak, till at last Fred broke the silence.

"Peggy treats me very coolly, Aunt Alice."

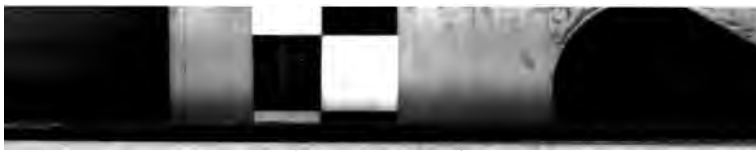
"Oh, Fred, the poor child! I'm afraid she is not well. There must be some good reason for her not being here before now."

"It is like her not meeting me the day I arrived," went on Fred, harking back to an old grievance. "I've a great mind to take myself off, Aunt Alice. If Peggy doesn't appreciate me, there are plenty of other girls who will."

Fred hardly meant his threat to be taken in earnest, but Mrs. Searle looked at him aghast.

"You would break Peggy's heart!" she said.

As she said it she had an uneasy consciousness of an over-statement, too big to pass muster



with anybody but Fred. Still, Peggy was very fond of Fred, as she knew to her own happiness —though the whole business was something of a mystery to her.

"You would break Peggy's heart, Fred," she repeated. "Peggy is very, very fond of you."

"How am I to know that, Aunt Alice? One can only judge people's feelings by their behaviour. If she is not fond of me she ought to be; that is all I can say. There are fifty girls ready to leap at her chances."

Mrs. Searle looked a moment with hesitation at Fred's pursed lips and moody eyes. Then she made up her mind to something.

"If you will not betray me to Peggy, Fred," she began, with an assumption of archness which did not altogether become her, "I will tell you a secret of Peggy's which will prove to you the injustice of what you have been saying."

Fred looked up eagerly. He was as curious as a dog; and he scented something pleasant to his vanity.

"Out with it, Aunt Alice," he replied. "It will be safe enough with me."

"Well, one day lately I came by accident on some of Peggy's treasures. I ought not to have looked perhaps, but I could not really help it. You remember the flowers you sent her for Lady Egdon's ball?"

"I should jolly well think so. A clinking sum

they cost me—in the depth of the winter too."

"I am sure they did; Peggy thought it most kind and—and—lover-like of you, dear Fred."

"And she kept them, wrapt them away in tissue-paper, in a box tied with blue ribbon? That's the style, isn't it, Aunt Alice?"

Fred was regaining his complacency. Seeing it, poor Mrs. Searle grew arch and talkative.

"I should never have believed it of Peggy. Peggy isn't at all the sentimental kind of girl. But, I had occasion to look for something in Peggy's desk, and I came upon this box. Even before I opened it I could smell the delicious fragrance. It was too bad of me to surprise the child's secret, but I could not resist it, Fred. It was like looking into my own youth. I took a peep. There, as I had suspected, I found your roses."

"My roses?—tuberoses you mean; gardenias; stephanotis?"

"Not those; your beautiful pink roses. We thought it so kind, so considerate of you to remember Peggy's colour. She would wear nothing else; and she was quite right. She looked lovely with the bouquet swung from her wrist, and some in her bodice, and a little wreath of them in her hair. Why, Fred!"

"I sent no roses," answered Fred, whose sudden leaping to his feet had provoked his aunt's startled exclamation. "I sent no roses;



but some one else did, and Peggy knew it. May I ask what she did with my bouquet?—a nice sum I spent on it, too."

"Oh, Fred——"

"There, I don't want to frighten you, Aunt Alice. It isn't your fault."

He put her back in the chair from which she had risen, not ungently. Fred was not at all ill-natured at heart, and he had something like an attachment for his aunt.

"It isn't your fault," he repeated. The childish sulkiness had vanished from his face, leaving something more manly behind. "Still, if Peggy wears another man's flowers and puts them away in tissue-paper, it can't be right for her to marry me, can it?"

"Oh, Fred, what have I done?" cried Mrs. Searle, almost beside herself.

"You've done me a good service," he replied, a bit grimly; "and you've done Peggy one too."

For the moment he had forgotten his vanity, his vulgarity. Amelia was as though she did not exist, for him. After all, there was something of real worth underlying Fred's character which circumstances had done much to spoil. After all, deep down under the spoiling there was a vein of simplicity and straightness, which came to him from his father.

He looked at Mrs. Searle, who had begun to weep helplessly. In a few seconds of silence

he remembered Peggy as he had known her from childhood, the enchanting Peggy whom he had been so ready to misprize, to forget, a few hours previously. A little spasm crossed his face.

"I'd rather not stay and meet Peggy," he said. "I don't know what she did it for; I don't suppose she meant me any harm. There, don't cry, Aunt Alice. I'll make it all right with the mater for you. She need only know that Peggy and I have changed our minds. Good-bye, Aunt Alice."

"Oh, Fred, must you go?" Mrs. Searle cried, in a voice of despair.

"Yes, I think I had better go. I'll write to Peggy." He had his watch in his hand, consulting it. "12.34 at Goshawk. I think I'll do it." He stooped down and kissed his aunt's forehead.

"Don't be too hard on Peggy," he said. "I daresay I deserved it, in a way."

He remembered yesterday as one remembers yesterday's sins, and was ashamed.

Ten minutes later Mrs. Searle, in a paroxysm of tears, heard the door close behind Fred. Peggy might come now, if she would. It was too late to recall him.



CHAPTER XXVI

MARRYING AND GIVING IN MARRIAGE

PEGGY came home to find her mother lying down with a sick headache and Fred nowhere.

She went at once to her mother's room.

"Keep as much as you can from your father," Mrs. Searle implored. "Let him believe you have had a tiff with Fred: anything; he will be easily satisfied, for he never wished for the marriage. Afterwards, when he has gone out again, come to me."

Mr. Searle was easily satisfied; too satisfied that Peggy had quarrelled with Fred to ask for details.

"Is it final, Peg?" he asked.

"Quite final."

"Then don't quarrel with any more lovers, little girl."

The house was quiet after lunch. Mr. Searle was in his library, deep in an article which would engross him to the exclusion of all the world, and from which he would have to be dug out when the dinner-bell rang. The coast was clear for a long talk between Peggy and her mother.

Mrs. Searle had confessed with tears the cause of Fred's offence and her unlucky blunder. Peggy listened with downcast eyes and rosy cheeks. She did not look at all like a girl whose lover has just deserted her. Still, there was plenty of cause for anxiety, for all her mother's fears had come back.

"Save me, Peggy, save me!" she cried in a frenzy. "Can't you make it up with Fred? Tell him it was my mistake, anything. You did think he sent you the roses, didn't you? I'm sure we both thought it. Who could have sent them?"

"Never mind," answered Peggy, "don't think about that now. I want you to have your drops and be quiet. I am going to save you."

"But how?"

"I have to think about that. Be quiet, mother dear. Here are your drops; swallow them."

She lifted her mother's head on her strong young arm, while Mrs. Searle drank the medicine. Then she pulled down the blinds and darkened the room.

"I shall not be very long," she said, "and I am going to bring you back good news. Be sure of that. Sleep if you can."

The day was closing in when she left her mother. Perhaps if she had had time to think she would not have done what she was going



to do; but it was the wisest, the straightest thing, after all.

She hurried along the road to Oriels, through the park where the mists were fast gathering, and presented herself to Briggs' astonished visage about three hours from the time she had left Oriels.

"Miss Brent is still in her room, Miss Peggy," he said, "and Mrs. Giggs is with her."

"I want to see Mr. Brent on business, if you please, Briggs," replied Peggy, thankful for the twilight that hid the perturbation of her face.

"He is writing letters in the library, Miss Peggy," answered Briggs, going before.

He announced Peggy, and went out, leaving her standing just within the great screen of stamped leather which shut off the draught from the door. She stood there, her eyes lowered, like a shy child. For the life of her she could not go a step further.

Tom Brent sprang to his feet with an exclamation and came to her. He took her ungloved hand in his; it was cold. With a murmur of compassion, as though she were indeed a child, he drew her towards the fire.

The lights were on in the room, and the whole place glowed pleasantly.

He put Peggy into the biggest chair, and then stood smiling down at her bent head. He could only see the top of her hat. There was

something in Tom Brent's gaze which had not been there yesterday—something fond and possessive, half-humorous, half-sad.

"Well, little one," he said, "what has brought you back? What has happened?"

"My cousin has gone away in anger," whispered Peggy, so low that he could hardly hear her. "He was gone when I returned."

"And you have come to tell me? I shall never forget it to you."

A light had leapt into the young man's eyes. He put his hand gently under Peggy's chin and lifted her face till he could look down into it.

"Oh, not that," said Peggy, in an agony of blushes. "How could you think I should come for that?"

"What for then?"

His face re-assured her. It was at once amused and tender, and it was very glad.

"You are very rich——" she began, and then the tears rushed into her eyes.

"I am fairly rich," he answered, releasing her so that she could hide her face from him. "Do you want money, little girl?"

"I want a great sum."

"How much?"

"Three thousand pounds."

The magnitude of the sum rather startled him, but he made no sign.

"Of course you shall have it. When do you want it?"



"As soon as you can get it for me. Some one is in trouble till I get it. It is a debt that must be repaid."

Tom Brent began to have glimmerings of the truth, or rather a part of it.

"You shall have the money to-morrow," he replied. "But now tell me, Peggy, is the cousin gone altogether?"

"Altogether."

"You know what that involves?"

He lifted her to her feet, putting both his arms about her.

"I know," said Peggy. "Could I have asked you for the money otherwise?"

"It's all yours now, Peggy, to do what you will with it; as I am all yours, heart's delight."

She gave herself up for a few minutes to his ardent caresses. Then she held him away from her with two small hands on his breast.

"We mustn't speak of it," she said, "not yet. I should be ashamed to let people know——"

"That you change your lovers so quickly? But I am the right one."

"Ah, yes," she answered, passionately, "you are the only one. It was for—some one else's sake—not papa's"—she had a momentary fear lest he should wrong her beloved father in his thoughts—"that I accepted poor Fred. As for Hilary, Hilary was like a dear brother. We mistook, because we were so young."

"We will keep our secret for a little while. You will tell me about the money though? How is it to be paid?"

Peggy thought for a moment.

"I do not know," she said, "Advise me. I had better be frank with you. It is my mother's debt to the Graces. She is afraid, now that Fred has left us in anger, that——"

"That she may have to pay. It is hardly likely. Mrs. Grace is her sister, is she not? Still, the debt is my affair now. I'll tell you what, Peggy; I'll give you a cheque for the amount. You can hold it over for a little while, to be used in case of emergency. If it is not called for before, you can pay it as soon as you are my wife. Let it be soon, beloved; I have no mind to wait."

So Peggy carried home the precious talisman in the bosom of her frock, and gave it to her mother to feast her eyes upon. Mrs. Searle, of course, had to be told how the master of Oriels had been in love with Peggy from the hour he saw her, and how Peggy, unwilling at first, had come to be in love with him.

For a little while the secret was kept even from Mr. Searle, who was easily deceived, and who, finding a congenial spirit in Tom Brent, did not need explanations of why he was so much about the house. Still, after a decent interval, Peggy's third engagement was an-



nounced. And everybody rejoiced over it; and even Hilary forgave and congratulated Peggy shamefacedly in an interview, during which he seemed more ill at ease than Peggy; as well he might, seeing that his marriage with Amelia was fixed for April.

Tom proved himself as always a lovely fellow to have for a brother, according to Amelia, for he was quite willing to relinquish Oriels to her.

"You have the first claim on it, Em," he said, "since you discovered it. We should never have been here but for you. Besides, since Peggy and I are going to see the world at our leisure we don't want to have a lonely ghost of a house calling us home. When we desire to set up an establishment you shall go house-hunting for us. Oriels would really be a burden on my hands, since the servants would certainly turn out and follow you and Hilary wherever you went."

"That was only the dear fellow's way of being generous," explained Amelia to Lady St. Denis, whose new name suited her so much better than the old one. "You see, he makes himself homeless for me, and pretends that I am doing him a benefit."

"My dear," said Lady St. Denis, shrewdly, "a millionaire like Tom need never be homeless."

"I believe what he'd like best," replied

Amelia, "in his heart of hearts, would be to pass his honeymoon in the Mill Cottage at Brent. I shouldn't be at all surprised to hear that he and Peggy had decided on America first, and to find they had lodged themselves for a bit in that little white-washed place with its English cottage garden and its pond full of water-lilies."

"It would suit Peggy better than you, you Bird of Paradise."

There is one person who must not be allowed to drop out of the story without a little praise.

After all, Tom Brent's cheque had never to be used, for, before Peggy's engagement was announced, Mrs. Searle had a letter from her nephew which brought the tears to her eyes, and to Peggy's too. It was a registered letter, and it contained a great bundle of I.O.U.'s.

"I don't want you to be worried about these, Aunt Alice," Fred wrote. "Grace's can do very well without the amount, which indeed we never meant to claim. I asked the pater to hand them over to me, and he did. He is better every day. He and the mater both send their love. They are off to Mentone on the 28th. They are grieved not to have Peggy for a daughter-in-law, but agree with me that perhaps after all everything is for the best."

Fred's discovery that Peggy had preferred another man to him, and his later knowledge



of the fact that the fascinating American had been romantically in love with the dispossessed heir of Oriels at the very moment when he had imagined her to be setting her cap at himself, did him good. When he married a Miss Lay, of the great coal firm of Matthew Lay & Pocock, a couple of years later, he was a much humbler lover, and proved a very excellent husband.

Perhaps the most interesting marriage of all, however, was that of Lady Margaret Pierpont.

Lady Margaret was still in disgrace with her mother, a disgrace which looked as if it was never to be lifted; and the Duchess had learned to say stinging things about her daughter's spinsterhood, things which would have been vulgar if said by a grocer's wife instead of a Duchess.

"Don't tell me, Plantagenet," she would say to the emancipated Duke. "She will never marry. She is twenty-seven and plain-looking; and the only suitor she ever had you and she got rid of between you. Besides, who wants to marry a Papist?"

"A Papist might," snapped the Duke.

"They, happily, are few and far between," went on her Grace, remorselessly. "No; you take my word for it, Plantagenet. Before you know where you are, she'll be slipping into some nunnery in the East End of London; and that will be your reward for encouraging her."

Her Grace had discovered how this threat had power to worry the Duke, and used it unsparingly. However, the Duke's hour was to come.

One day he suddenly invaded her Grace's workroom, where she had now a prim young maid who sat under Mr. Babcock to help her with the cutting out instead of her daughter.

"Send away Sutton," said the Duke, straddling the hearth-rug. "I've business to discuss with you, Theodora."

"Can't you postpone it, Plantagenet? The Mothers' Meeting to-night——"

"No, ma'am, I can't," growled the Duke, so ominously that Sutton scattered her materials and departed hurriedly, only to acquire an earache by listening at the key-hole.

"I've had a visitor this morning, Theodora," the Duke went on as soon as they were alone.

"Indeed?" replied her Grace, with languid interest.

"Drop those scissors and listen to me."

Her Grace put down the scissors with a meekness that would have been impossible a year ago.

"I've had a suitor for Meg's hand," thundered the Duke.

"Mr. Finch? I thought he meant something when he said to me that he had no religious prejudices. She had better take him. It will probably be her last chance."



"It wasn't Finch, ma'am. Finch wouldn't have the impudence to ask for my girl. It was" —he paused a second to emphasise the importance of the communication—"it was Lord Alured Fitzwalter."

"Lord Alured Fitzwalter! What an excellent match! Why, she will be the Duchess one day. But will she have him?"

"She sent him to me. It's a love match on both sides. You should have heard Fitzwalter. And as for Meg: Meg's face is enough. They are in the Library. They ask your blessing, ma'am."

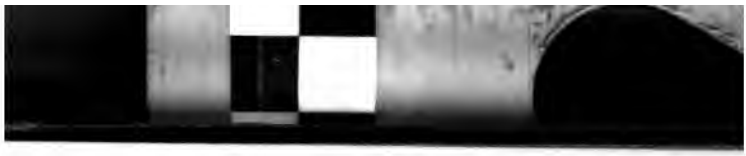
Her Grace thought for a second.

"After all?" she said solemnly. "The ways of Providence are wonderful. I can see the finger of Providence in what I considered my poor child's being led astray. There's a deal to be thankful for, Plantagenet,"

"There is ma'am," answered the Duke.



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